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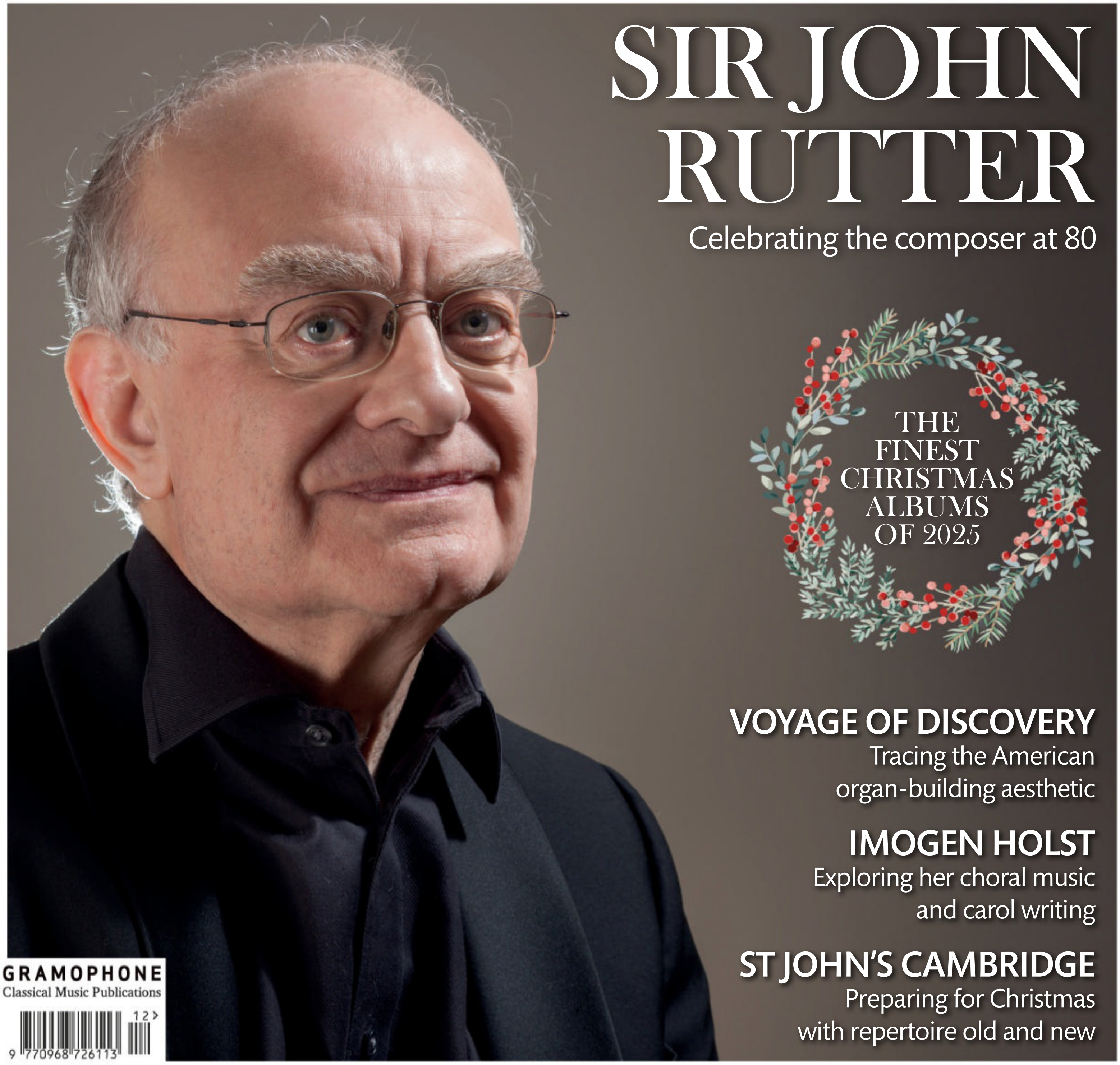

SIR JOHN RUTTER

Celebrating the composer at 80

THE FINEST CHRISTMAS ALBUMS OF 2025

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Tracing the American organ-building aesthetic

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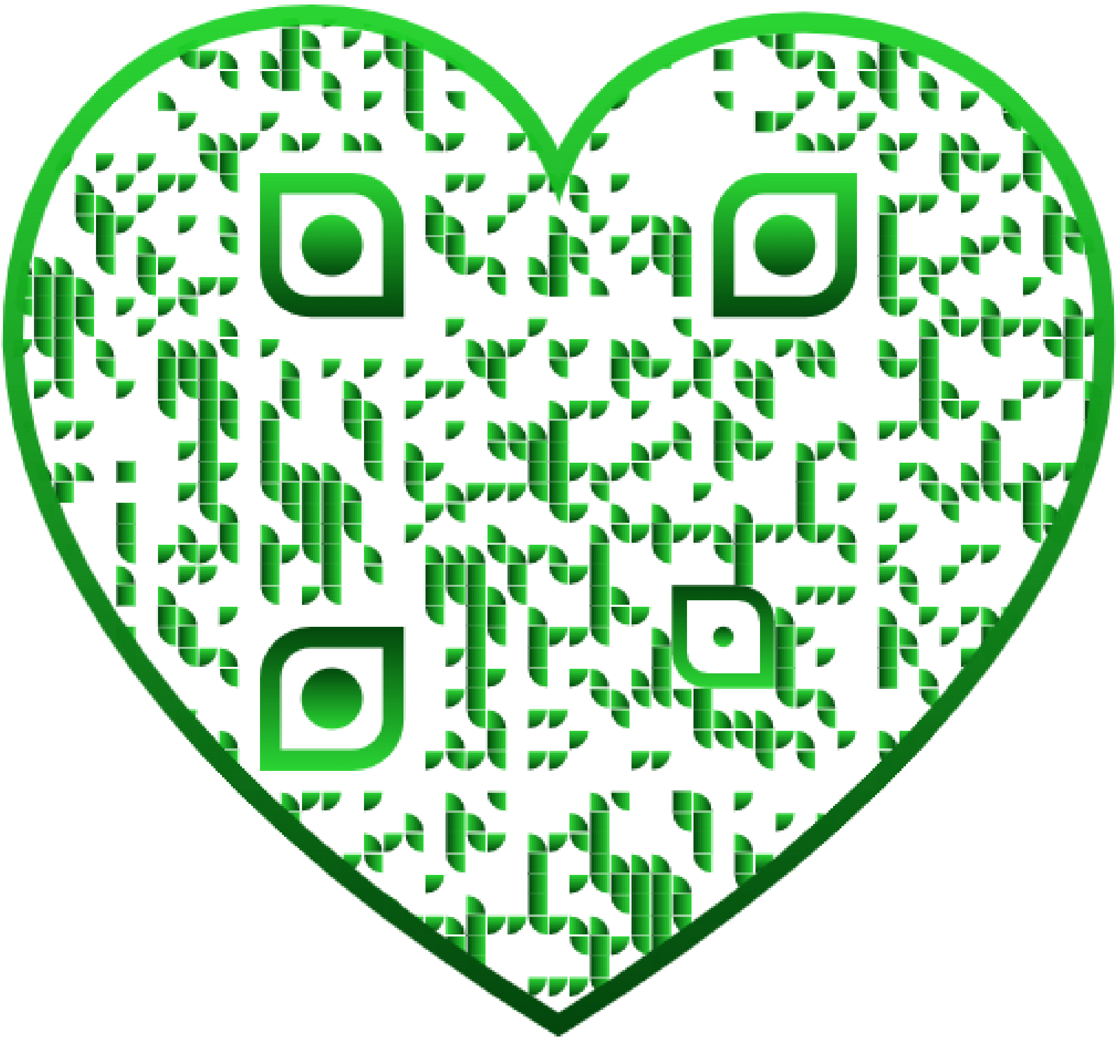

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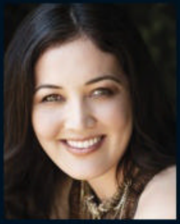
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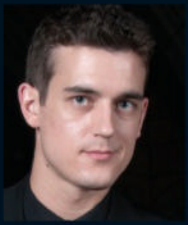
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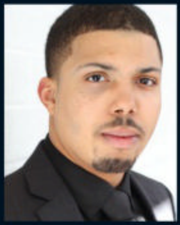
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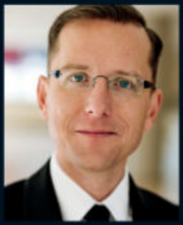
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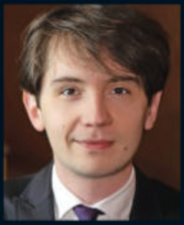
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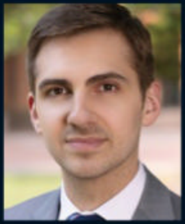
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April/May 2026

Trinity College
Cambridge, UK
September 2026

Notre-Dame Cathedral
Paris, France
April 2027

New College
Oxford, UK

COMPETITION WINNERS

*Ryan Chan — AGO National Young Artist Competition in Organ Performance
**Johannes Skoog — Canadian International Organ Competition

EDITOR'S LETTER

Celebrating a beloved choral figure

PHILIPPA BUTTERWORTH

I've often wondered what it is that makes Christmas music sound festive or 'Christmassy'. Is it a particular chord progression, suspension or tempo? Or is it more about how sacred words are painted by a composer to illicit an emotion? What's certain for many of us, is that the sound of Sir John Rutter's carols is synonymous with the season.

I grew up singing Rutter in my school Christmas concerts and chamber choir. Frosty car rides throughout December would often have my family's favourite Rutter Carols album from The Cambridge Singers and many of us can name one that is particularly special to us. For me, 'Jesus Child' always brought a particular sparkly excitement.

Celebrating Rutter as he turns 80 feels like an important moment. It's clear that his career is far from slowing down, and, as Alexandra Coghlan finds in her fascinating profile of the composer, he now finds himself determined to campaign for music and choral singing. As he reminds us: 'music is something we're always going to have to make a case for. You can never assume it's safe.'

Many enjoyable trips have led to further articles in the issue, including a piece by Clare Stevens on the Northampton Bach Choir and organ surveys in both the USA and The Netherlands from Andrew Forbes and Chris Bragg. I also spent the morning at St John's College, Cambridge with Director of Music Christopher Gray speaking about the choir's new Christmas album and learning about his ongoing commitment to developing relationships with living composers.

As the Winter issue marks the end of 2025, we also hear from the final of our 2025 New Music composers – thoughtfully mentored by our New Music Editor Matthew Power – who have each written a work for The Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge and Steven Grahl. It's been such a joy to get to know the composers this year, and we look forward to sharing with you our next partners in Spring 2026.

From Rutter's carols to the new voices shaping tomorrow's repertoire, this issue celebrates the continuum of choral creativity that defines *Choir & Organ*. Wishing you all a joyful end to the year with time to listen, reflect, and, of course, to sing.

Hattie Butterworth, Editor

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> **Specialist writers appraise new editions and recordings of standard repertoire and works fresh from the composer's pen, while our news and previews chart the latest developments in a changing world and present opportunities to become involved.**
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www.markallengroup.com

Choir & Organ (ISSN 0968-7262 PE 7314) is published four times a year in February, May, August and November by MA Education & Music, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, London SE24 0PB, United Kingdom.

The US annual subscription price is $38. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. US Postmaster: Send address changes to *Choir & Organ*, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Subscription records are maintained at MA Education & Music, Unit A, Buildings 1-5 Dinton Business Park, Catherine Ford Road, Dinton, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP3 5HZ. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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Printed in the UK by Pensord Press Ltd, Dowlais, CF48 3TD

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ROYAL ALBERT HALL LAUNCHES INAUGURAL ORGAN SCHOLARSHIP

ADOBE STOCK

The Royal Albert Hall has announced the launch of its first organ scholarship – a new initiative designed to support emerging talent. Led by the hall's organist Anna Lapwood, the year-long programme will offer one outstanding young musician, aged 20-25, the chance to develop their craft at the console of the hall's 'Father' Willis organ.

The inaugural scholar will enjoy regular access to the instrument for practice sessions, £1,500 in financial support, shadow Lapwood at performances and appear as a guest artist in a live concert.

'I'm really looking forward to working closely with a young organist over the coming year as part of the Royal Albert Hall's new Organ Scholarship,' said Anna Lapwood. 'I've learnt so much from that instrument and that space in recent years, and I'm thrilled that we can now offer that experience to another young musician.'

Matthew Todd, Director of Programming at the Royal Albert Hall, described the initiative as 'a remarkable opportunity for a promising organist to develop alongside a true innovator, on the most legendary pipe organ in the world.'

Applications are open until the end of November, with auditions on the Grand Organ scheduled for December. The first Royal Albert Hall Organ Scholar will take up the post in January 2026.

Applicants are invited to submit two contrasting performance videos, along with either a short personal statement or a two-minute film outlining their suitability for the role.

GERAINT BOWEN TO RETIRE FROM HEREFORD THREE CHOIRS FESTIVAL IN 2026

HEREFORD CATHEDRAL

Geraint Bowen has announced his retirement in 2026, concluding almost a quarter of a century as organist and Director of Music at Hereford Cathedral and as Artistic Director of the Hereford Three Choirs Festival.

Since his appointment in 2001, Bowen has led eight Hereford festivals, praised for their mix of core repertoire, rediscovered rarities and new commissions. Highlights have included Dyson's *Quo Vadis* and *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, Schumann's *Das Paradies und die Peri*, Smyth's Mass in D, and this year's performance of Coleridge-Taylor's *The Atonement.* He was also responsible for the 2015 tercentenary festival, which placed Purcell's *Te Deum*, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* and Messiaen's *Turangalîla-Symphonie* within 36 hours.

Bowen has commissioned works by composers including Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, Bob Chilcott, Sir James MacMillan and Dobrinka Tabakova, while building a reputation as a skilled choral trainer.

Reflecting on his tenure, Bowen cited memorable performances of Haydn's *The Creation* and *Die Jahreszeiten*, Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*: 'It has been a huge privilege to have been associated with the Three Choirs Festival for nearly 25 years ... Long may it continue to flourish!'

The Three Choirs Festival, the world's oldest continuously running classical music festival, rotates between Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester. The 2026 festival will take place in Gloucester (25 July - 1 August), before Worcester hosts in 2027 and Hereford welcomes the 300th edition in 2028 under Bowen's successor.

British Institute of Organ Studies announces 2026 conference

The British Institute of Organ Studies (BIOS) has announced that it will be hosting a three-day conference in April 2026 in celebration of its 50th anniversary.

Titled 'The Global British Organ', the conference will be held at Wadham College, Oxford 9-11 April 2026 and will focus on the global impact of the British organ over the centuries, the influence of foreign organs imported into the UK on the British organ, and the influence of British organ music around the world.

BIOS is inviting proposals for papers and themed round-table discussions now, which should be sent to Dr Katherine Pardee at 50@bios.org.uk. The deadline for proposals will be 10 January 2026.

In addition to organ recitals and conference papers, there will be a gala reception and dinner in the Hall of Wadham College. Day rates will be available in addition to the full-conference and accommodation rate, with further details and application information appearing on the BIOS website soon. Generous financial assistance will be given to young researchers and full-time students on application. For more information visit bios.org.uk

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Maximilian Haller wins Northern Ireland International Organ Competition

LIAM MCARDLE

Northern Ireland International Organ Competition announced Italian 19-year-old Maximilian Haller as the winner of its 2025 competition, which took place in St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral, Armagh on 11 and 12 August.

Haller played the movement 'Hermes' from Jean Guillou's suite *Hyperion*, two movements from J S Bach's Organ Concerto in D minor BWV 596 'After Vivaldi', and Reger's Fantasia in D minor.

A student at the University of Music and Theatre Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in Leipzig, Germany, Haller receives £4,000 awarded by The John Pilling Trust and a trophy awarded by Neiland and Creane Organ Builders of Kilinick, Co Wexford. He is also awarded recital appearances hosted by St Thomas Fifth Avenue, New York, Westminster Abbey, King's College, Cambridge, St Michael's Church, Dún Laoghaire and St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast. Maximilian Haller also won the Dame Gillian Weir Medal, plus £300 donated by Wilson Auctions, for the stand-out performance of a single work, the Reger Fantasia.

On receiving the award Haller said: 'For me, the main focus was to give my very best while still letting the music breathe and speak. Performing pieces from the German Romantic tradition, which I truly love, made the whole experience even more special. The audience was so warm and appreciative, and it was a real joy to share this music with them. I also really enjoyed the atmosphere of the competition and the chance to meet everyone involved – it's a wonderful experience that goes beyond just the prize.'

Second Prize in the Senior category of the competition went to Jukka Geisler, 19, a student at the University of Music and Theatre in Munich, Germany, who received the David McElderry Memorial Award of £1,000 and public recitals hosted by St Paul's Cathedral, London, Trinity College, Cambridge and The Portico of Ards, Co Down. Geisler also won the Bach Prize of £300, donated by Mrs Elizabeth Bicker MBE.

The third prize was won by Daniel Carroll, 20, from the USA, a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. He receives £300 sponsored by Wells-Kennedy organ builders and public recitals at St George's, Hanover Square, London; Glasgow Cathedral; and Galway Cathedral. Highly Commended Awards were given to Pascal Bachmann (18, UK) and Julien Landers (20, Luxembourg).

The competition jury was chaired by Sophie-Véronique Cauchefer-Choplin, organist of the Great Organ of Saint Sulpice in Paris, who was joined by Simon Harden, lecturer in organ performance at the TU Dublin Conservatoire, and David Hill MBE, Artistic Director of the Bach Choir, London and of the Charles Wood Summer School, which runs concurrently with the organ competition.

IN BRIEF

Bloomsbury Organ Day will be returning on 31 January at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church. Free recitals and talks will be heard between 1pm and 5pm including those from RCO Academy, Philip Norman on church music in Wales and Hamish Wagstaff. A celebrity recital from Loreto Aramendi, organist of Basilique of Santa María del Coro, will conclude the day at 6pm.

RSCM president and organist **Hugh Morris** is set to take on an impressive endurance challenge when he plays for 25 hours straight, beginning at 5pm on 21 November to raise money as part of the Royal College of Organists' 'Play the Organ Year'. The event will be livestreamed on YouTube.

The **Reverend Richard Coles**'s cosy crime novel *Murder Before Evensong* has been made into a TV series, due to be aired this autumn on Channel 5. It stars actor Matthew Lewis as Daniel Clement, the Rector of Champton, who finds himself turning amateur sleuth.

NEWS & PREVIEWS

NEW ORGAN FOR GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL TO BE UNVEILED IN 2026

Gloucester Cathedral has announced that its new organ, built by Nicholson & Co, will be installed and unveiled at Easter 2026, in time for that summer's Three Choirs Festival. The project, which began in 2024, involves a complete renewal of the organ's mechanism, including new soundboards, console and wind system, while retaining the historic façade and restored Harris pipes dating from 1666.

Designed to serve as a liturgical and concert instrument, the organ will feature an expanded tonal scheme, including new 32-ft stops, enabling it to accompany both choirs and orchestra. Assistant Director of Music Jonathan Hope described it as 'the heartbeat of the cathedral's worshipping life' and a resource for the wider community.

ADOBE STOCK

PAST LIVES

MARTIN NEARY (1940-2025)

Martin Neary was one of the most influential and entrepreneurial musical figures of his generation of cathedral organists. He was deeply invested in the Anglican Choral Tradition, having been a chorister at the Chapel Royal, organ scholar at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, assistant organist and subsequently organist at St Margaret's Westminster, organist of Winchester Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. He had a life-long interest in contemporary music and maintained particularly close relationships with John Tavener and Jonathan Harvey.

Martin Gerard James Neary was born on 28 March 1940; at the age of eight, and with perfect pitch, he gained a place as a chorister in the choir of the Chapel Royal. This was a formative experience for him, particularly singing in the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 in Westminster Abbey, a place to which he would return. After attending the City of London School, he was awarded an organ scholarship to Gonville and Caius College where he initially read theology with the possibility of entering the priesthood. But it was music that was engaging him the most; he changed direction and, instead, studied for the music degree.

In 1963 he was appointed assistant organist of St Margaret's, Westminster, and in 1965 he was made organist in succession to Herbert Dawson. During this time, he met Penny Warren, daughter of Sir Brian Warren and Dame Josephine Barnes; they were married in St Margaret's in 1967. During what was a very happy time at St Margaret's, his close relationship with the rector, Michael Stancliffe, proved to be influential. Stancliffe was appointed Dean of Winchester Cathedral in 1969 and with the retirement of Alwyn Surplice in 1972, Martin was appointed as his successor at the age of 32, maybe to the surprise and disappointment of some senior colleagues who thought he was jumping the professional queue.

History has proved how enlightened his appointment was, as he brought relative youth, energy, enthusiasm and ambition to the cathedral. The collective and creative energy which emerged between Martin, the dean and Bishop John Taylor was uniquely symbiotic and, to this day, has never been surpassed. I was the grateful recipient of much of this when I succeeded him as organist in 1988. Martin's exacting standards and ability to attract high calibre trebles and lay clerks placed Winchester's star as shining high in the constellation of the cathedral music world.

His appointment to Westminster Abbey in 1987 came as no surprise. It was a position he had coveted since singing in the 1953 Coronation. Listening to the choir during his time, the boys' sound, in particular, was very impressive and overall standards were unquestionably high. The untimely death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 meant organising a funeral in six days. Few had heard of Tavener's *Song for Athene*, which was sung as her coffin was borne out by the pallbearers. Neary was appointed LVO in the 1998 Honours List.

In 1998, he left the Abbey in unfortunate circumstances following a long and unnecessary court case over financial issues. The Dean of Winchester at that time was Trevor Beeson, who had also been rector of St Margaret's Westminster and a canon at the Abbey: he referred to the case as 'an outrage which should have been avoided' – words we shared in conversation.

Martin Neary was devoted to his family. He leaves his wife, Penny, who has been a tower of love and support over nearly 60 years, Nicola, Alice and Tom and six grandchildren.

DAVID HILL

Andrew Nethsingha announced as RCO president-elect

ROYAL COLLEGE OF ORGANISTS

The Royal College of Organists (RCO) has announced Andrew Nethsingha as President-elect of the charity. He will succeed current President Sarah MacDonald in July 2026 and serve a two-year term. Nethsingha is currently organist and master of the choristers at Westminster Abbey, having previously spent 15 years as Director of Music at St John's College, Cambridge.

RCO Chief Executive Sir Andrew Parmley said of Nethsingha's appointment: 'Andrew Nethsingha's career has been one of outstanding artistry, leadership and service to the organ and choral music. His work at some of our nation's most important choral foundations, his performances with leading orchestras, and his international reputation make him a fitting and inspiring choice as our next president.'

PLAY THE ORGAN YEAR WITH THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ORGANISTS

FINGERS, FEET AND IMAGINATION: LEARNING THE ORGAN FROM SCRATCH

By Drew Cantrill-Fenwick

The pipe organ is often called the king of instruments – majestic, versatile, and unmatched in scale. But for a beginner it can also be one of the most daunting.

Three staves of music instead of two, multiple manuals, and a pedalboard requiring independent footwork make it an altogether different proposition from the piano. For children especially, the size of the instrument can be a barrier: the music desk is further away and the pedalboard often lies out of reach. Yet there are lots of practical and creative solutions, and starting early brings clear benefits. Young learners grow into the instrument naturally, without having to undo habits formed elsewhere, and early exposure to pedalling offers an immediate and exciting new dimension to their playing.

A new approach

These principles are central to a new tutor, *Fingers and Feet: A Journey to the Organ Bench*, by Drew Cantrill-Fenwick and Robin Harrison, supported by the Diocese of Leeds and the Royal College of Organists, and edited by David Pipe. From the very beginning, learners make music through listening and exploration before approaching notation. The 'Sound to Sight' principle ensures that improvisation is integrated from the beginning, and the first steps are taken on the black keys, easy to navigate and rich in pentatonic potential.

Two ways of learning

Approaches to teaching often divide between structure and discovery. One focuses on steady, graded progress, and accuracy before advancement. The other prioritises exploration, encouraging learners to see patterns and core ideas for themselves. In practice, the most effective teaching draws on both: structure provides security, and discovery builds independence.

Posture, touch, expression

Technique begins with posture. A stable pelvis, mobile knees, and relaxed ankles allow for smooth pedalling; a free upper body supports controlled hand movement. From this base, expression comes through touch: shaping the length of each note and articulating lines so that every release is deliberate.

Practical foundations

The tutor introduces fun exercises designed to establish a good hand and foot position. Rhythmic awareness is developed step by step, from single notes to more complex groupings. Reading follows a similar progression: from steps and skips, to recognising patterns, to full notation.

Repertoire with range

Specially-composed pieces in a wide variety of styles – from jazz and funk to Baroque pastiche – give students both incremental challenges and variety. This stylistic breadth sustains motivation and each piece reinforces technique while gradually expanding musical vocabulary.

The book also includes duets, allowing ensemble playing from the very first lessons – directly challenging the stereotype of the organ as a solitary instrument.

Training the musician

The tutor is designed to take a student from first steps at the organ through to roughly ABRSM Grade 3. Along the way it builds solid technique while developing aural awareness, rhythmic control, and musical independence.

Each stage turns the instrument's challenges into strengths, encouraging adaptability, creativity, and laying a firm foundation for future study.

Fingers and Feet: A Journey to the Organ Bench will shortly be available as a free download from the RCO and Diocese of Leeds, with printed copies on sale from the RSCM.

Drew Cantrill-Fenwick is an organist, choral director, academic, examiner and educator with a particular interest in creative approaches to organ teaching

PREMIERES

PREMIERE SPOTLIGHT

ADOBE STOCK

Kantos Carol Competition Winner
Kantos / George Herbert
Friday 12 Dec, St Thomas of Canterbury Church, Chester, UK
Saturday 13 December, St Ann's Church, Manchester, UK

Kantos are calling all composers to get involved in their Carol Competition, a yearly tradition in Kantos which forms a key part of their Christmas celebrations. Composers can submit their work and be in with a chance of winning £500. The deadline for submissions is 26 November. The successful composition will be chosen by guest panellist, composer Cecilia McDowall and performed in the Candlelit Carols with Kantos concerts.

NUMBER 25 PHOTOGRAPHY

Charlotte Baskerville: ***The Christmas Singers***
The Saint Cecilia Singers
Friday 12 December, Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucester, UK

The Saint Cecilia Singers (Gloucester Cathedral's chamber choir) was originally founded in 1948 as The Christmas Singers. Their very first concert was a recital of Christmas music, beginning with the traditional Somerset Carol. Charlotte Baskerville's new piece, *The Christmas Singers*, takes that inaugural concert as its inspiration, exploring the choir's heritage and longstanding connection to the cathedral. The composition is strongly influenced by Gloucestershire composers, including Herbert Howells, and was developed through a series of collaborative workshops with the choir. Choir member Sarah Brush has also created a new piece of artwork inspired by the music and Gloucester Cathedral's great east window. This new choral work will be premiered by The Saint Cecilia Singers on Friday 12 December in the Lady Chapel of Gloucester Cathedral.

Evelin Seppar: ***Seesama meri*** (NP)
The Carice Singers
8 Nov, Barbican, London, UK

Malcolm Archer: ***St Paul's Service*** **(Magnificat & Nunc dimittis; Preces and Responses; Blessed city, heavenly Salem)**
Choir of St Paul's Church, Augusta, Georgia
9 Nov, St Paul's Church, Augusta, Georgia, USA

Kim André Arnesen: ***Holy Spirit Mass*** (NP)
Konzertchor Harmonie Zürich | Zürcher Symphoniker
9 Nov, Große Kirche Fluntern, Zürich, Switzerland

Julian Anderson: ***Chants***
Olivier Latry (org) | Anssi Karttunen (vcl)
10 Nov, Musiikkitalo Helsinki, Finland

Outi Tarkiainen: ***Marjakka (Lighthouse)***
Olivier Latry (org) | Anssi Karttunen (vcl)
10 Nov, Helsinki Music Centre, Helsinki, Finland

Elena Mendoza: ***Über Zauberei***
SWR Vocalensemble | Peter Rundel
12 Nov, Taschenoperfestical Salzburg, Austria

Phillip Cooke: ***Pavane and Galliard***
Carson Cooman
12 Nov, Memorial Church, Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA

Anna Disley-Simpson: ***Double, double, toil and trouble***
Kantos Choir
14 Nov, Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, UK

Martin Christoph Redel: ***Schließe mir die Augen beide***
Kammerchor St Jacobi | Stefan Kordes
16 Nov, St Jacobi-Kirche, Göttingen, Germany

Matias Vestergård: ***Mys og lørke***
DR Vokalensemblet | Martina Batic
19 Nov, Trinitatis Kirke, Copenhagen, Denmark

Joel Järventausta: ***There Will Come Soft Rains*** (NP)
The Carice Singers
22 Nov, St Paul's Hall, Huddersfield, UK

Tarik O'Regan: ***Dominion of Light***
International Orange Chorale of San Francisco
22 Nov, St Mark's on O'Farrell, San Francisco, USA

Seán Doherty: ***Peperit Virgo***
Dulciana Vocal Ensemble | Judith Lyons
23 Nov, St Ann's Church, Dublin, Ireland

Naji Hakim: ***Concerto No 5*** (NP)
Komorní filharmonie | Naji Hakim
24 Nov, Dům hudby, Sukova síň Pardubice, Czech Republic

Nico Muhly: ***O adoranda trinitas***
Vox Medicea, Fondazione Mascarade Opera | Mark Spyropulos
29 Nov, Church of Santa Felicita, Florence, Italy

Errollyn Wallen: ***Nolo mortem peccatoris***
St John's College Cambridge Choir
29 Nov, St John's College Chapel, Cambridge, UK

David Bednall: ***Jubilate***
Third Baptist Church Choir | Brent Johnson, Philip Barnes
30 Nov, Third Baptist Church, Saint Louis, Missouri, USA

Alison Willis/Charles Anthony Silvestri: ***The Canticles of Mary***
Louth Choral Society | Olivia Thomas, Graham Eccles
30 Nov, St James Church, Louth, Lincolnshire, UK

Mary Finsterer: ***Auxilium Christianorum***
Trinity College Choir Melbourne, Melbourne Youth Orchestra | Christopher Watson, Donald Nicolson, Brett Kelly
2 Dec, Melbourne, Australia

Mary Finsterer: ***The Lord Ruleth Me (Dominus regit me)*** (NP)
Trinity College Choir Melbourne, Melbourne Youth Orchestra Choir, Christopher Watson, Donald Nicolson, Brett Kelly
2 Dec, Melbourne, Australia

Cassie Kinoshi: ***Untitled***
City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra | Michael Seal
7 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham, UK

Roxanna Panufnik: ***Aurora***
City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra | Michael Seal
7 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham, UK

Bernd Richard Deutsch: ***Massenkristall***
SWR Vocal Ensemble
11 Dec, Odeon, Salzburg, Austria

Nico Muhly: ***Whispered & Revealed*** **(*version for choir, strings & harp*)**
New Century Chamber Orchestra, San Francisco Girls Chorus
11 Dec, First Congregational Church, Berkeley, USA

Charlotte Baskerville: ***The Christmas Singers***
The Saint Cecilia Singers
12 Dec, Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucester, UK

Josephine Stephenson: ***New Work***
Raquel García-Tomás: ***Vols brisés*** (NP)
The Carice Singers
13 Dec, Kings Place, London UK

Carter Datz: ***O Magnum Mysterium***
Saint Louis Chamber Choir | Philip Barnes
21 Dec, Saint Louis Abbey Missouri, USA

James MacMillan: ***Ordo Virtutum*** (NP)
NFM Choir | Sofi Jeannin
18 Jan, National Museum, Wroclaw, Poland

Errollyn Wallen: ***New Work***
Daniel Hyde (org)
27 Jan, Royal Festival Hall, London, UK

Please email items for News and Letters to the Editor for publication in future issues to hattie.butterworth@markallengroup.com, or post to The Editor, *Choir & Organ*, Mark Allen Group, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, London SE24 0PB, UK

RECITAL ROOM

The National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

ADOBE STOCK

VENUE FOCUS

The National Museum of Wales, Cardiff,

The National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, was established and funded by a Royal Charter in 1907 and is located in Cardiff's Civic Centre. The museum contains some of Europe's finest collections of art. It houses the 1774/1846 Williams Wynn chamber organ built by John Snetzer, a noted Swiss-German organ-builder operating in London. In 1864 the organ was moved to Wynnstay Hall near Ruabon, where it was rebuilt by Gray & Davison. In 1994 the instrument was offered for sale, and in 1995 the museum acquired it. As part of the installation, a new housing structure was constructed to allow the case to stand free in a gallery, rather than being recessed in a wall as it had been at Wynnstay. The museum provides regular Thursday lunchtime concerts organised by Cardiff Organ Events.

TOP CONCERT CHOICES

► On 9 December at 6.30pm, **Malvern Priory** will welcome Michael Bacon (Great Malvern Priory) to play Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur*, meditations on the birth of the saviour, which is part of the 2025 Organ Recital series. Entry is free with a retiring collection.

► On 15 November, from 7.30 pm to 9pm, **Salisbury Cathedral** will present a unique performance of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with Jonathan Hope improvising on the organ and starring Lon Chaney as Quasimodo. Hope will be composing in the moment to complement the film's action and emotion.

► Roger Sayer will be performing at **Smith Square Hall** on 18 December. The programme will offer familiar melodies accompanied by creative interpretations, including John Ireland's *The Holy Boy* and *Capriccio*, Louis-Claude Daquin's *Noël X Grand Jeu, et duo*, and Johann Sebastian Bach's Christmas and New Year Chorale Preludes-from the Orgelbuchlein. Tickets are £6 and the performance will begin at 1.05pm.

The Nativity of the Lord by L Costa

Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick at 1.15pm
Oliver King (14 November), Mark Swinton (9 January)

Chichester Cathedral, Chichester at 1.10pm
William Fox (18 November), Tom Howell (27 January)

Cheltenham College Chapel, Cheltenham at 1.15pm
Alexander Ffinch (2 December)

St John's Church, Ranmoor, Sheffield at 8pm
Peter Shepherd (4 December), Tim Selman (8 January)

Freemasons' Hall, London at 6pm
Thomas Trotter (12 November)

Symphony Hall, Birmingham at 1pm
Thomas Trotter (15 December, 12 January)

St John's Church, Cardiff at 1.15pm
Thomas Trotter (14 November)

Birmingham Town Hall at 1pm
Thomas Trotter (17 November, 8 December, 26 January)

Halam Court, Southwell, Nottingham at 3pm
Dr Peter Siepmann (7 December)

Leeds Cathedral, Leeds at 1.15pm
Shanna Hart (10 November), Darius Battiwalla (17 November, 8 December, 19 January), Alexander Woodrow (24 November), RNCM Brass (1 December), Dr Gordon Stewart (12 January), George Herbert (26 January)

Chester Cathedral, Chester at 1.10pm
David Hirst (13 November), Philip Rushforth (20 November, 18 December, 1 January), Graham Eccles (27 November, 29 January), Daniel Mathieson (4 December), Alexander Langian-Palotai (11 December, 15 January), David Holroyd (22 January)

St Paul's Cathedral, London at 4.30pm
Hamish Wagstaff (9 November), Marius Herb (23 November), Luke Mitchell (7 December), James Orford (14 December), George Inscoe (4 January), Richard Gowers (18 January)

St Lawrence Church, Alton at 8pm
Peter Wright (2 December), Joshua Simões (6 January)

Oxford Town Hall, Oxford at 12pm
Cynthia Hall (19 November)

Westminster Abbey, London at 5pm
James Hicks (9 November), Paul Greally (16 November, 14 December, 11 January), François Cloete (23 November, 21 December), Robert Sholl (7 December), Ashley Wagner (28 December), Augustine Cox (4 January), Harrison Cole (18 January), James Gough (25 January)

St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh at 6pm
Jack Oades (7 December), James Gough (4 January)

St Bride's Episcopal Church, Glasgow at 1pm
Alan Kitchen (7 December), Eilidh Harris (4 January)

Usher Hall, Edingburgh at 1.10pm
John Kitchen (1 December, 5,12,19,26 January)

St Michael's Cornhill, London at 1pm
Ben Comeau (10 November), Benjamin Markovic (17 November, 5 January), Gerard Brooks (24 November), Anthony Gritten (1 December), Jeremiah Stephenson (8 December), Elliot Randall (12 January), Jake Scicinski (19 January), Paul Ayres (26 January)

St George's Hall, Liverpool at 12.45pm
Ian Tracey (18 November, 10 December)

Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool at 1pm
Ian Tracey (22 December)

St John, Hyde Park, London at 5pm
Ian Tracey (22 November)

Lincoln College, Oxford at 2.10pm
Gerard Brooks (12 November)

St John the Evangelist, Islington, London at 6.30pm
Nicolas Kynaston Memorial Concert (10 December)

Methodist Central Hall, Westminister at 3pm
Gerard Brooks (16 November), Darius Battiwalla (18 January)

Notre Dame de Londres, Leicester Square, London at 7:30pm
Concert marking 100th anniversary of the death of Eugène Gigout (9 December)

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London
Daniel Moult (29 November), Bloomsbury Organ Day (31 January)

Norwich Cathedral, Norwich
David Hirst (20 November), Ashley Grote (1 January, 11 January)

Temple Church, London
Conor McGlone (12 November), Thomas Allery (19 November)

While every effort is made to provide correct information, readers are strongly advised to check details online before attending

Light in the darkness: music's most profound and sacred duty

TONY SIMPSON

As we approach the reflective season of Advent, **Patrick Hawes** looks at how sound itself can rekindle the light within the human soul

A Swedish friend of Haydn who attended the premiere of *The Creation* reported that 'At that moment when light broke out for the first time, rays darted from the composer's eyes, and the orchestra could not proceed for some minutes.' Clearly, the audience burst into spontaneous applause at the point where the *pp* dynamics of 'and there was' give way to an electrifying *tutti fortissimo* on the word 'light'. Most of us will have our own memories of this extraordinary musical moment: as an unwitting teenager in Lincoln Cathedral, I certainly remember the goosebumps and tingling spine as orchestra and choir suddenly exploded into life. For 18th-century concert goers, the effect must have been even more momentous – life-changing even. In the space of just two bars, Haydn not only manages to portray God's seismic creation of light but also crystallises the immense power which the concept of light holds over the art form of music.

Composers are able to portray the extremes of darkness and light in obvious ways. The latter is associated with optimistic major keys, consonant harmonies and high tonal registers whereas minor tonality, ominous harmonies and the doom and gloom of the lowest notes of voice, instrument or orchestra paint a much more dismal picture. And yet, great moments of darkness in the canon of classical music and, more particularly light, reveal more subtle approaches and techniques. In *The Creation*, the electrifying fortissimo on 'light' is set as a pure, root-position D major chord with cascading strings reminiscent of the sun's rays. The string patterns which portray 'die Strahlen der Sonne' (the rays of the sun) in the final section of *The Magic Flute* are not dissimilar: once again, there are primary major chords, this time almost hymn-like, which underpin the luminous semiquavers as Sarastro praises the radiance of morning which shall dispel all darkness. Later musical representations of sunrise have resulted in such iconic moments as the opening bars of both Grieg's *Peer Gynt* and Richard Strauss's tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The former employs translucent strings whereas the latter calls upon a blazing brass ensemble set against fiery, pounding timpani.

With the birth of the 20th century, however, music began to lose its identity as a supreme language of light. Rather than moments or passages of darkness infiltrating a world of predominant brightness, an overriding backdrop of dark greys – even blackness – became the canvas upon which light struggled to flicker. We have only to look back to 1915 and the unveiling of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* to see how firmly rooted the concept of darkness became in the psyche of modern artists. This canvas, devoid of light and colour, served as Malevich's proclamation of supremacism – a bold assertion of abstraction over representational art. At the same time, The Second Viennese School was conceiving its first opera in the form of Berg's thoroughly depressing *Wozzeck,* and in 1916 Herbert Howells produced *By the Waters of Babylon* – an uncharacteristically bleak work which sinks into expressionist harmonies and avoids any final resolution by simply fading away.

In 1914, the foreign secretary Edward Grey declared, 'The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.' He was speaking, of course, of the First World War and he could not have known that his words would come to have a deeper resonance, reflecting the discolouration of Christian faith, philosophic discourse and the entire sphere of the arts. For the darkness, destruction and division of two world wars, together with the scars of atheism and nihilism, caused an acceleration in the dominance of the mind over the soul and compounded an already serious shift in human consciousness towards a rebellious and cynical liberalism.

Late 20th-century works such as Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* reimagined the sufferings of war in the form of simplicity and transparency, and Arvo Pärt's tintinnabuli style (dating from 1976) led – in the words of the composer himself – to a 'white light which contains all colours.' Masterpieces such as these have, in turn, set music on a course of renewal which is already coming to form the outlines of an exciting post-modern age. As the seasons of Advent and Christmas approach, swathes of people will attend their local church or cathedral in search of comfort and inspiration. And it is to the candlelight and the music that they will reach out most of all – the candlelight as a visual reminder The Light of The World and the music as something unseen that helps lift their weary spirits. Let us, therefore, unashamedly write, direct, play and sing music which will truly satisfy their needs. ■

composer Reena Esmail

Colin Lynch, Trinity Church Boston
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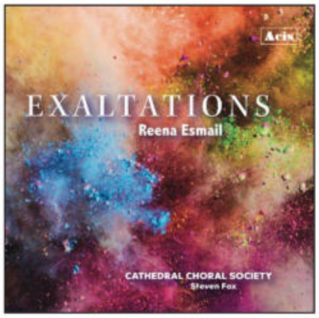
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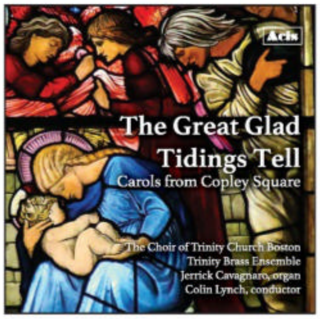
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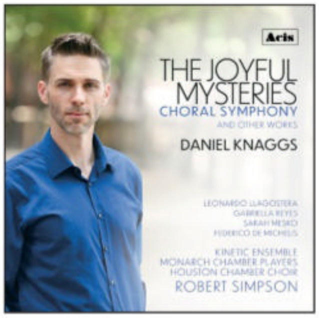
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Imogen Holst

Leah Broad explores the legacy of Imogen Holst and how her practical approach to composition shaped 20th-century British choral music

Imogen Holst was an eminently practical woman. Of her more than two hundred compositions, many of them were written for amateur ensembles, students, or with particular performers in mind. She liked to write, as she called it, 'useful' music. Such was her usefulness that most choirs will at some point have performed her work, whether knowingly or not, in her capacity as an editor and arranger of music by composers from Schütz to Britten. But she also wrote extensively for choir herself, both as an arranger of folk songs, and as a composer of original works. Her choral music spans the entire breadth of her career, and together these pieces represent the essence of Holst as a composer.

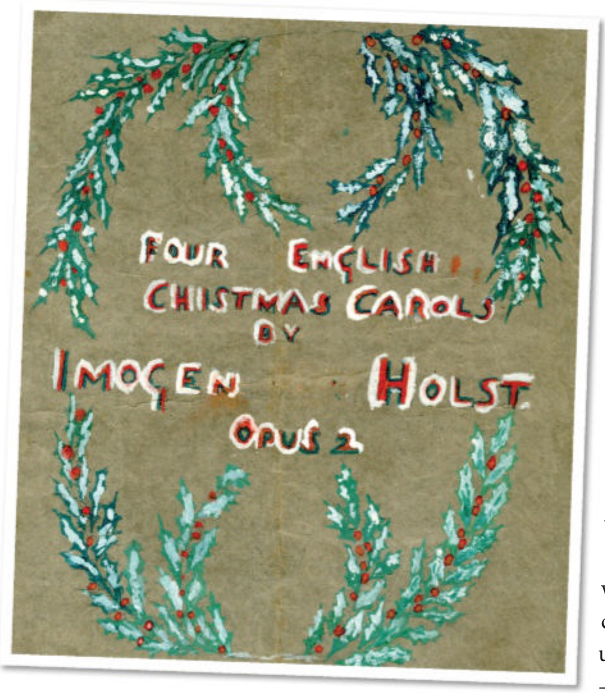
The first pieces Holst wrote for choir were Christmas carols, penned in 1918 when she was just 11 and still a pupil at St Paul's Girls' School in London, where her father Gustav was Director of Music. Gustav was immensely proud of his talented daughter. When it became clear very early on that she was musically gifted, he prompted her to develop her talents – even if he did not 'want her forced into a prodigy.' He gave Imogen a copy of Edith Rickert's *Ancient English Christmas Carols* as a gift, writing in the cover that it was 'to help her do her Opus II and in honour of Opus I', which had been a one-movement sonata for strings and piano completed in August 1918.

She would return to carols much later, once she had rather more opuses behind her. Her three sets of six Christmas carols for upper voices cover arrangements of such classics as 'The Holly and the Ivy', 'I Saw Three Ships' and 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', as well as more unusual carols including 'Lord Jesus Hath a Garden.' Always, Holst kept an eye on practicality. Her 1940-46 *Six Traditional Carols* were prefaced with the note that they were written for groups where 'some of the singers may still be in the early stages of trying to read their notes. Each part is easy enough to be learnt by rote if necessary. Every verse is sung to the same setting so that choirs can learn the carols by heart for singing out of doors in the dark.'

Encouraged by her father, Holst took an early interest in folk song and dance. She had originally wanted to be a dancer but was rejected from dance school on health grounds in 1921. Nonetheless she continued dancing. In 1923, while she was still at school, she joined the English Folk Dance Society (founded by folk-song collector Cecil Sharp in 1911), and as a teenager completed a number of folk dancing courses and summer schools where she was 'folk-dancing absolutely every minute of the day.' From 1932 she would work there as a member of staff, after it had become the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS).

NIGEL LUCKHURST COPYRIGHT: BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

◄ **Imogen Holst at her desk**



◄ **The front cover of Imogen Holst's carol book**

BRITTEN PEARS FOUNDATION

Holst grew up amid the early 20th century's fascination with folk song, and she would become a formative figure in carrying through that interest into the later 20th century. She helped to organise the first folk music course run by the EFDSS and arranged the music for the 1936 National Festival of English Folk Dance and Song held at the Royal Albert Hall. But it is through her copious arrangements of folk songs that she has the most lasting impact. Her choral arrangements range from mixed chorus to unison voices, covering folk songs from across the breadth of England. The most extensive are her collections from the 1950s and '60s. *A Jubilee Book of English Folk Songs* (1958) brackets songs together by topic from love to the sea, while *A Yacre of Land* (1960) and *Twenty Traditional British Folk Songs* (1967) cover songs appropriate to every season.

Perhaps guided by her interest in folk music, as well as music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Holst's own style was characterised by a remarkable clarity of expression. One of her largest works is her 1927 Mass in A Minor, for unaccompanied mixed choir. It is hard to believe that this is a student work, written for her 'paperwork' class at the Royal College of Music. Even though she was only 20, Holst wrote with complete self-assurance. The piece never suffers from extraneous material or over-burdens the voices. She always has an eye on what is both practical and possible to sing, using only what is absolutely necessary to communicate. Holst's close friend Rosamund Strode wrote of her that 'simplicity was always her watchword', and this is nowhere more apparent than in the Mass. This is music that is simply written, but not simple to sing. Her writing showcases the quality of the voices – or, conversely, exposes them. Like Vaughan Williams's 1921 Mass in G Minor, it is a 20th-century answer to Elizabethan choral music, building on the sounds of Thomas Tallis and William Byrd's masses.

What Man Is He?, written a few years after the Mass, has a much grander palette. For mixed choir and orchestra, based on a text from the *Book of Wisdom*, it follows more in the late 19th-century British choral sound of Elgar, Parry and Stanford. Over the 1930s, however, she would return to the more pared-back aesthetic of the Mass, refining the techniques that she had begun developing there to hone her distinct sound – warm but economical. In 1940 she wrote *A Hymne to Christ*, for unaccompanied mixed choir, setting the first two verses of John Donne's poem written 'at the Author's last going into Germany.' In the midst of the Second World War, Donne's words about leaving Britain and putting his faith in God to guide him took on a new resonance: 'I sacrifice this land unto thee, And all whom I lov'd there, and who lov'd mee.' Holst's beautiful but melancholy piece stops rather than ends, gesturing hopefully to an uncertain future at the close. It would not be performed in Holst's lifetime, and was only published in 1998.

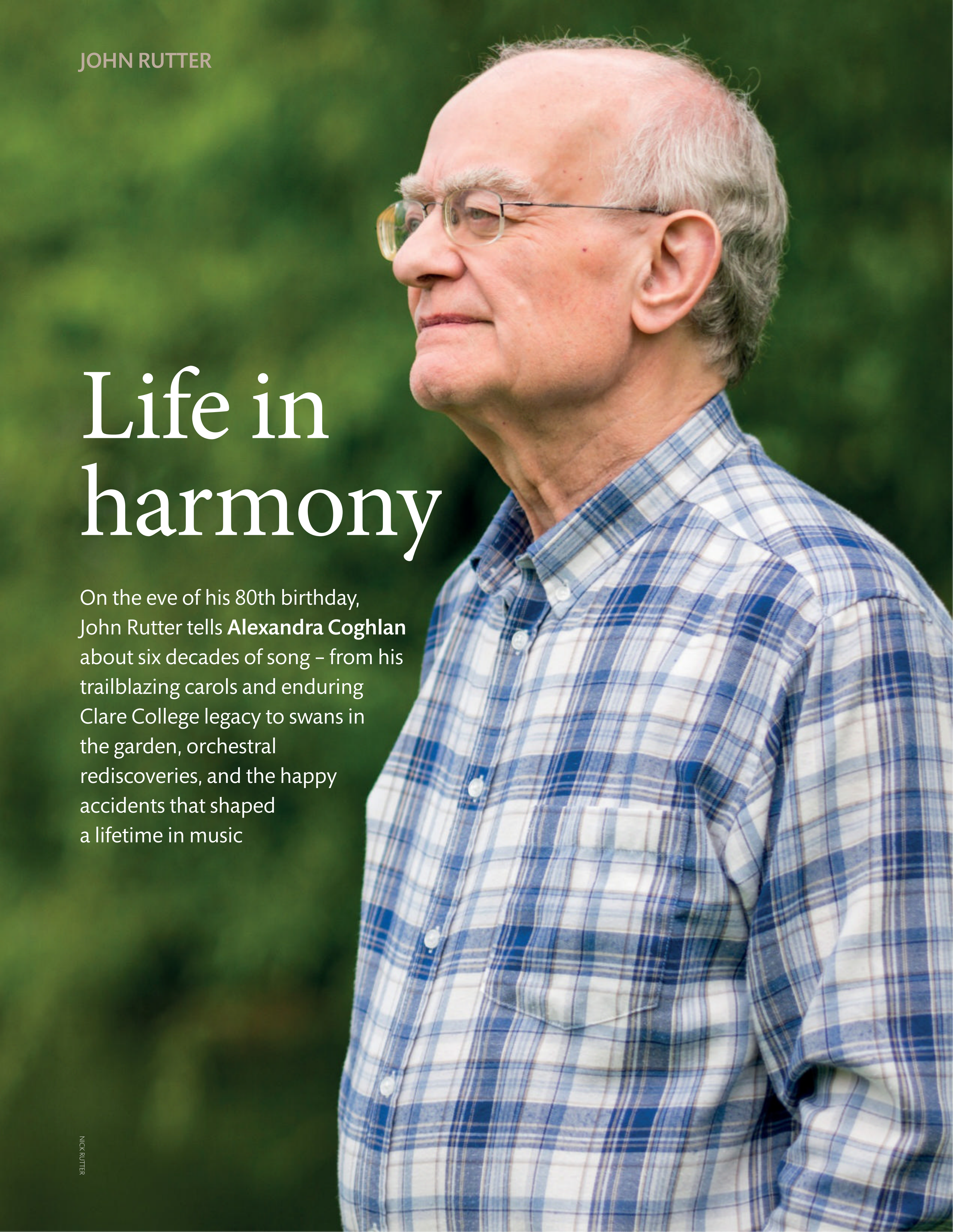
Holst was a dedicated educator, and she spent much of the war involved with initiatives to keep musical education and performance running. From January 1940 she became one of six 'Music Travellers', a scheme run by the Pilgrim Trust to organise rural community music-making, which was later brought under the auspices of the government-funded Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. The events she was asked to organise were 'always something of an adventure', she admitted, especially as the 'drop-in-and-sing' festivals she organised 'invariably clashed with some world calamity.' Yet despite the practical difficulties and the war raging around her, she remembered these years as 'idyllic'.

Community music and education were for Holst not just an interest but a calling. So, when she was invited to set up a music course at Dartington Hall – the progressive arts community in Devon – she accepted with enthusiasm. Under Holst's leadership, Dartington would become one of the leading lights of British music. It was an extremely fruitful atmosphere for Holst, and many of her compositions from the 1940s stem directly from her involvement with Dartington. Both her 1944 *Five Songs for Upper Voices* and 1946 *Festival Anthem* for mixed choir and organ were dedicated to Dorothy Elmhirst, co-founder of the community. The *Anthem*, a setting of Psalm 104, sits between the Mass and *What Man Is He?* in tone. It is magisterial but keeps the same feeling of lightness and movement that animates her smaller instrumental works.

Holst was modest to a fault, and always put others' work before her own. When she appeared on *Desert Island Discs* in 1972, she went so far as to remark that she was 'not really a composer', and 'really not very bright, I'm afraid.' Yet her own assessment of her achievements is quickly discredited by the quality and quantity of her music. Her colleagues, too, evaluated her work quite differently. Ursula Vaughan Williams said of Holst that 'everything she does has a quality all her own, where perception and imagination grace knowledge and mastery of her subject.' Perceptive, imaginative, graceful, knowledgeable and masterful – this is the woman who we hear in Holst's choral music. ■

'Every verse is sung to the same setting so that choirs can learn the carols by heart for singing out of doors in the dark'

Leah Broad is an award-winning writer, and the author of Quartet: How Four Women Challenged the Musical World



Life in harmony

On the eve of his 80th birthday, John Rutter tells **Alexandra Coghlan** about six decades of song – from his trailblazing carols and enduring Clare College legacy to swans in the garden, orchestral rediscoveries, and the happy accidents that shaped a lifetime in music

NICK RUTTER

'Orlando! Orlando!' We're standing on the riverbank, and John Rutter is not invoking the ghost of his musical forebear, but calling one of the swans who have made their home at the bottom of his garden. Today, Orlando is playing it cool in the absence of his favourite smoked mackerel (Waitrose only). His predecessor Rufus would regularly wander into the composer's kitchen, Rutter tells me, and 'look hopefully at the fridge'.

The BBC's *Through The Keyhole* invited viewers to guess 'Who lives in a house like this?' – it wouldn't be hard in this case. Standing on a sunny afternoon in a Cambridgeshire village, among climbing roses and thatched roofs, a honey-coloured church just over the garden wall, and a cluster of ducks, geese and swans sheltering under a willow tree, this little Eden couldn't belong to anyone other than Rutter: classical music's fairy godfather and resident purveyor of starlight and angels.

He was tapped for greatness by David Willcocks, the legendary King's director of music who helped Rutter publish his first pieces while still a Cambridge undergraduate and shortly after chose the young composer as his collaborator on the influential *Carols for Choirs* series. Rutter's 60-year career has been a golden thread of success, awards and honours. Now firmly established as one of the world's most-performed living composers, adding a knighthood to his OBE last year, you could forgive Rutter for taking it easy on the eve of his 80th birthday.

But it takes a lot of work to keep the magic flowing. At his desk until midnight the night before – 'Occasionally we all have to write through the night. Sometimes you just find a deadline closing in on you' – today Rutter is demob-happy, another big project off the list. With a bulging international concert-diary ahead, a record label to run, no fewer than four imminent recordings to celebrate his 'round-number birthday', as well as the seasonal commitments that come with being Britain's best-loved carol composer, it's the briefest of respites – just, one suspects, as Rutter likes it.

The way he tells it, though, it's all a happy accident. 'If you talk to any composer they will tell you that you don't necessarily shape your career; it shapes you. The invitations, the suggestions, the commissions that come in will largely determine what you write unless you set your face against that, ignore what people want. If at university I had made friends with the Footlights actors instead of the organ and choral scholars, then I might have had a very different career.'

It wasn't quite that simple of course. After a purely classical education, first at Highgate School and then at Clare College, Cambridge, Rutter, who describes himself as '50 per cent songwriter', was faced with a crossroads.

'It's true,' he admits, 'I was swimming against the tide in the mid-Sixties when the avant-garde was in full flood: Darmstadt, Boulez, IRCAM and all of that.'

His decision to follow a different path, to 'write what was in my heart' as his Director of Music once advised, changed the narrative and emboldened a generation. Composer Bob Chilcott remembers it well: 'Classical music wasn't like that at the time – not at all. John's music changed the dynamic, it just felt so fresh. He was a real trailblazer for people who wanted to sing something attractive, and sing it well.'

Leaning back in an armchair, Rutter is quick to dismiss any suggestion of courage.

▲ John Rutter at Cambridge in 1968

'Choirs have always been one of the glories of Cambridge, but I think the institution fails to recognise and celebrate them as they should'

▸

► Rutter with David Willcocks

COURTESY OUP

‘I think it’s just stubbornness! I’ve never quite worked out where I belong. But that’s ok, because in falling between stools I seem to have found an audience for what I write. What does take bravery is to be a late Beethoven – not to care if your music will only be appreciated in 100 years’ time. That’s something I think I would find very hard.’

For all the sweetness of his melodies and poetry, and musical settings unafraid of warmth and consonance, Rutter is a pragmatist: clear-sighted, wry, absolutely unsentimental, with trenchant opinions on the parlous state of music education and cultural politics in the UK. A skilful mimic (a succession of affectionate, keenly-accented impressions, including an ennobled Welsh bass-baritone and a celebrated Scottish tenor punctuate our conversation), he’s equally precise in his view of his own work: ‘musical desserts rather than main courses’.

It’s a view that was shared by Rutter’s Cambridge composition tutor Patrick Gowers, Rutter explains with a grin. ‘He always told me what a terrible disappointment I was to him. I carried that burden of guilt for decades until I met Nigel Hess at a PRS lunch and got talking. He had told him exactly the same thing, so we shook hands and decided that we’d form the London branch of the Cambridge Disappointments Club!’

For all Gowers’ gloomy reservations, Rutter’s time at Clare ‘transformed’ his life. He soon returned to the college as the choir’s first professional Music Director at a milestone moment in Clare’s history: when it became one of the first three mixed colleges to admit women.

‘Cambridge and Oxford had been yardsticks for a particular kind of choral singing,’ he says, ‘but the whole game changed overnight. It was an exciting time to be in charge of the music. You’d get sniffy reviews if you dared perform Byrd with a mixed choir, mutterings about the “unique quality” of boy sopranos, but to my mind it’s like an organ with two stops: both beautiful but different.’

Despite leaving to pursue freelance opportunities in 1979, Rutter’s relationship with the choir has persisted, and the composer has latterly become a familiar, disembodied voice from the booth during recording sessions under Music Director Graham Ross. (‘It’s a good sign when you’re saying nothing. Producers only matter when things aren’t going well…’). But when Ross told Rutter of his plans for the latest – a celebration of Rutter’s own music – it came as a complete surprise.

Programmed by Ross – ‘I left him to it!’ – the result is a sampler of the composer’s career and relationship

> ‘Choirs sometimes feel they have to make things deep and spiritual and too slow. I favour a certain spontaneity…’

with the college, stretching back to his earliest published work (the *Nativity Carol*, composed when Rutter was just 16) to the recent *A Ukrainian Prayer*, a response to the 2022 Russian invasion, and the playful Shakespeare-triptych *Bard's Eye View* ('Just a little piece of fun – me in informal attire!'). The centrepiece is the six-movement choral sequence *The Gift of Life* – a work Rutter described as an 'anti-Requiem'.

'There's a formal text for a Requiem Mass, even if composers choose to leave bits out or add bits in – but there's nothing laid down in Christian liturgy to celebrate life.' The result dances and surges with joyful energy, piquant and light-footed in a reduced orchestration – recorded here for the first time. At its centre is a familiar movement – *Hymn to the Creator of Light* – Rutter's 1992 'orphan' anthem, whose radiant, ritual stillness finds a new frame in the larger cantata.

Does Rutter-the-producer ever come into conflict with Rutter-the-composer? After six decades of hearing choirs perform his music, he must have some strong opinions, surely?

He laughs. 'It helps if people do what's written! Choirs sometimes feel they have to make things deep and spiritual and too slow. I favour a certain spontaneity and lightness of touch – if a piece is intrinsically sweet or charming then don't pour sugar on treacle, just do it simply, plainly. A sense of style is very important with music that's slight; you can't destroy the B Minor Mass or *Figaro*, but you can easily ruin a Strauss waltz or a Grainger song if you do it wrong.'

Rutter's beloved Cambridge has been in the news for the wrong reasons recently, after the summary disbanding of St John's Voices in the name of diversity and inclusion. It is, Rutter says, 'A sad saga that has turned out well in the end'. Reincarnated as the Cambridge 'Schola Cantorum', the choir can now spread

▲ **Rutter with a swan in his garden**

▼ **'Occasionally we all have to write through the night. Sometimes you just find a deadline closing in on you'**

NICK RUTTER

NICK RUTTER

▲ **Rutter founded The Cambridge Singers in 1981**

its wings further afield, tackle projects beyond the scope of a college ensemble. 'Choirs have always been one of the glories of Cambridge, but I think the institution fails to recognise and celebrate them as they should. The beautiful buildings can be maintained with minimal effort, but music is something you have to commit to remaking every day. It gives the university a living soul, which is just as important as Nobel Prizes.'

Rutter is synonymous with choral music, but a second release this autumn is a reminder that the composer (whose repertoire knowledge is described by the BBC Singers' newly appointed director of music Owain Park – a former Rutter pupil – as 'encyclopaedic') has far wider interests.

Reflections – his first 'purely orchestral' album – reunites Rutter with long-time collaborators the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra for a premiere recording with a long-shared history. Back in 1979, Rutter wrote a piano concerto for the orchestra, afterwards packing it away in a box and forgetting about it. A lockdown loft clear-out brought it back to light, and now the unpublished work has its first outing courtesy of Scottish pianist Steven Osborne.

'You do get typecast,' says Rutter. 'Anything orchestral is like starting my career all over again. I'm known in choral circles, but not really beyond, and yet I love writing for orchestra.' There are advantages, however, to Rutter's 'little area of the musical forest': to working in more compact musical forms, in a style graspable by both listeners and often amateur performers. 'Small pieces become the small change of musical life: they just circulate!'

'I feel fortunate,' he says, 'to be writing the kind of music that can fill a gap in people's lives, music that gets done on occasions people will remember: baptisms, weddings, funerals. I appreciate hugely when people get in touch and say that this or that piece has been a consolation in dark times. You can't plan on that, but it's a wonderful by-product I never expected.'

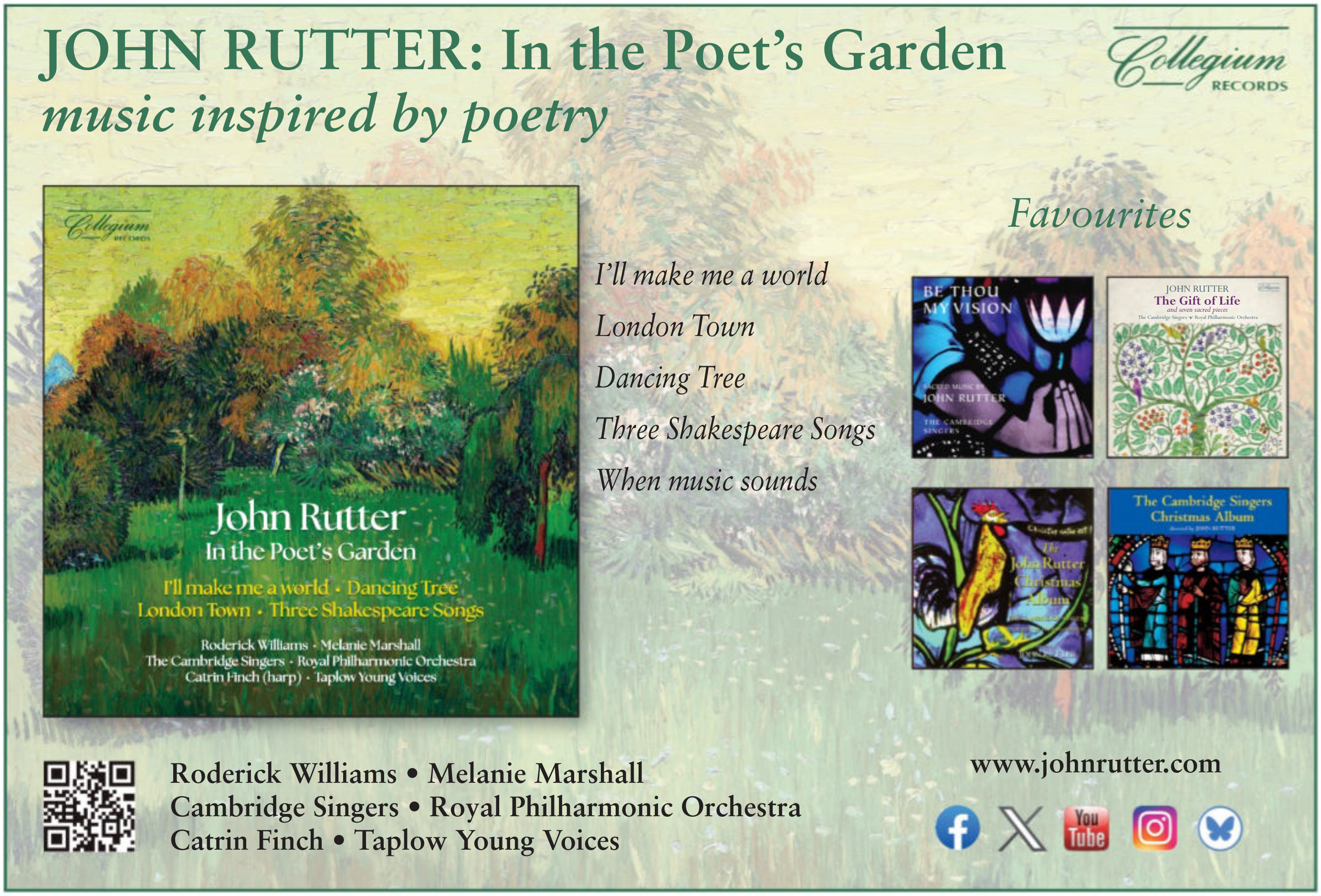
Rutter's private listening habits are a different matter, though, he confesses. 'I'm one of the dozen or so listeners to the *New Music Show* on Radio 3 on a Saturday night. I like to imagine this handful of us, dotted around the UK, tuning in to hear the latest, cutting-edge, wildly adventurous avant-garde music. I hugely admire musical explorers, even though I'm not one of them.' So how would he characterise himself?

'I'm more of a magpie, a composer who gathers sounds that are in the air. It always surprises me when people say they instantly recognise my music, because there's nothing original in what I write – not remotely. Maybe though, even if I think I'm borrowing, there's some unconscious process of making it my own which gives a distinctive flavour.'

Looking to the future, Rutter describes his outlook as that of a 'bruised optimist'. He worries about the meltdown of the recording industry ('The traditional economic model has disappeared') and predatory big tech, hungry for creative content but not prepared to pay for it, but remains confident in both the quality and appeal of classical music itself.

'Genius speaks across the generations; there will always be ears to hear it, and it has never been easier to do so. There are always philistine voices – that's nothing new. Music is something we're always going to have to make a case for. You can never assume it's safe. But often the loudest voices are those complaining or attacking. It makes for spicier headlines. Quiet appreciation of something lovely isn't a news story, sadly.'

Not, that is, unless you're John Rutter. ■



JOHN RUTTER: In the Poet's Garden

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Considering approaches to Romantic organ music, legato, tempo and rubato all come under the spotlight

▲ **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) at the organ of the Salle Gaveau, Paris, 1905-10**

Brahms, Schumann, Liszt, Saint-Saëns, Franck, Elgar… Much literature on performing this wonderful body of organ music focuses (understandably) on the instruments involved. But this is not the whole story of course, and there is a danger of overlooking larger holistic issues. Let's consider the two most critical areas.

Legato

It is widely accepted that the basis of articulation became smoother as the 19th century progressed, from the primacy of piano legato as advocated by Muzio Clementi (1801) through to Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens's total organ legato (1850 and 1862). On this continuum, there are different approaches concerning legato touch, rather than the blanket *legatissimo* still applied indiscriminately to much Romantic performance.

In Germany, there were degrees of legato, ranging from the loose and barely connected, to the super glue (and in the case of Liszt's *tutti tenuti* markings, to a deliberate overlapping of notes). We see this in Carl Czerny's pedagogical works in the 1830s, and such an approach was most likely the basis of Mendelssohn's keyboard playing (although this is a 'hot potato' among more recent commentators). Mendelssohn's slurs (another contentious area) might elicit different intensities of legato, such as a string or wind player would instinctively create. The slurs might also mean different things in different contexts: sometimes legato (how much?), sometimes a phrase or a shape within a phrase, and sometimes an *abzug* (shortening the value of the final slurred note, in the late 18th-century manner).

This variety of legato touch seemed to continue in Germany as late as Karl Straube, whose Bach editions from 1913 list a myriad of different articulative approaches, and which might seem like a logical expansion of the earlier 'ordinary touch' we considered previously (*C&O* Summer 2025, pp 24-25). Given that there was no stylistic difference between performing Bach and Reger at this time, we can assume that the German taste remained for hierarchies of legato and a musical, subtly varied approach to articulation. There is research still to be done on how Germanic (or not) English organ touch was, but the prevalence of the W T Best edition (Novello 1869) of Rinck's tutor book might just suggest a similar approach.

The same could not be said of France! *Legato absolu* (i.e. *legatissimo*) was codified in Lemmens's important 1862 organ tutor book, and was the backbone of organ playing. The apostolic succession from Lemmens to Guilmant and Widor, to Dupré and Messiaen, was based on a totally legato touch for the most part (nearly always unmarked, but assumed). This was achieved by copious use of finger (and sometimes toe) substitutions, and the heel becoming effectively the equal of the toe. Thumb, finger and toe glissandos (i.e. sliding) were an important part of this technique, with Lemmens advocating using the tip and base of the thumb for full control. The exceptions to this unremitting legato were occasional references to non-legato made in the score, and of course any annotated staccato notes. Staccato, according to Widor, was cutting short the sounding note by half its value, or cutting it by a quarter, an eighth, or the smallest prevailing note value in the case of longer notes or slower tempos. Other exceptions to constant legato included marches, toccatas and the like, which might be played with a *détaché* or *brillante* touch, depending on the context. To what extent, though, did Franck and Saint-Saëns apply such rigorous pedagogy in their organ playing? They knew of these *legato absolu* techniques, but their approaches

A move away from tempo ordinario led to an increasing reliance on the metronome

might have been less dogmatic and more inspired by their mainstream orchestral and piano aesthetics…

92

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▲ The Peters Edition of *Twelve Pieces for the Organ* by Max Reger, edited by Karl Straube (1918)

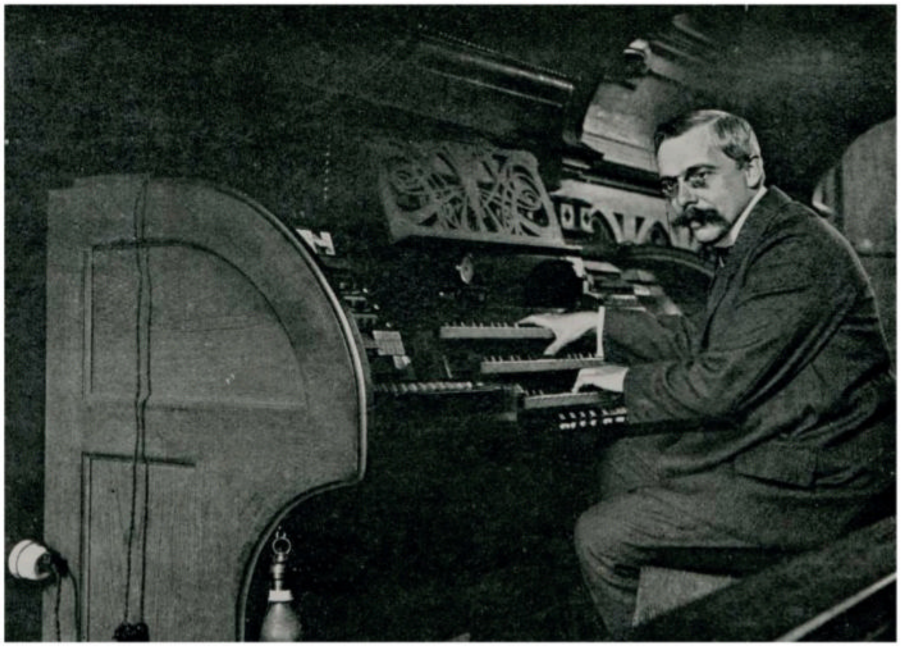
Tempo

The 19th century saw a move away from the *tempo ordinario* (based around the human pulse and connected with time signatures) to a wider range of tempos. All this led to an increasing reliance on the metronome (invented in 1812). In Germany, however, older organ-playing traditions were much slower to dissolve. Tempos in Mendelssohn's Organ Sonatas are markedly more conservative than in his other works. They reflect, perhaps, the 18th-century culture of flowing slow speeds and unfrenzied fast tempos. Brahms did not leave metronome marks in his organ works, but those left elsewhere in his oeuvre tend to suggest a similar avoidance of excess in either direction.

In France, Franck's tempos as inherited and cherished by his students and grand-students never exceeded the need for clarity, poise and good pipe speech and wind on Cavaillé-Coll organs. The contentious issues raised by the more extreme, faster Franck metronome marks published in 1999 have not been widely adopted. But they lead us into another arena which has increasingly preoccupied some musicians since the 1980s: the 'double beat' theory of metronome marks.

This theory postulates that some 19th-century musicians interpreted the number on the score as two clicks rather than one (i.e. that the speeds indicated were actually played at half the speed which we currently expect, given our single-click approach). Originally focusing on faster tempos in Beethoven, the movement has passionate supporters and cynical deniers in equal measure. From our perspective, the theory might make sense of some excessive speeds in Max Reger, where halving the tempo (in works before *c*1907) makes sense of both inherited performance traditions and the slower pneumatic action organs of his time. It might also explain some of Straube's halved metronome markings in later Reger editions. But there is conjecture here…

▼ Karl Straube at the organ of St Thomas Church, Leipzig, where he was Cantor from 1918-40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And finally – what of *tempo rubato*? Flexibility of tempo can be as important as the choice of tempo in projecting Romantic music, and requires intelligent and sensitive application. Czerny advised that rubato should be tasteful, while complaining about the propensity towards caricature and arbitrary changes of tempo which seemed to be the norm by the mid-19th century. Not that exaggerated rubato cannot be effective within the right context. Wagner's rubato was famously excessive during his 1855 London visits, and his essays on conducting convey a strong sense of how rubato can illuminate a piece's structure, as well as being an essential surface decoration.

Throughout my short series, we have seen that performance traditions can present as many questions as answers. I hope that you find much fulfilment in exploring creative solutions in your playing! ■

Daniel Moult is a concert organist and organ tutor based in London. He is head of organ at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire

David Hill

In conversation with ...

Marcus Creed

Conductor and director of the Danish Radio Vocal Ensemble

What were your earliest musical encounters?
I started learning the piano at the age of six – I had a problematic leg, so not being allowed to play football, this seemed an appropriate alternative! My grandfather was a gifted amateur musician, my parents not musical at all. Primary school offered several opportunities, and the local Eastbourne Music Festival was always a challenge for us young musicians, where I had some success as a pianist and singer, less so as a violinist! The Director of Music at Eastbourne College was John Walker. He had been senior choral scholar at King's College, Cambridge, in the 1950s, when Boris Ord was organist and conductor. So his influence in the direction of my future was immense. Music at the school was varied, and for those interested, at times intense. Under his guidance I was able to take up a choral scholarship at King's in 1971.

Did you enjoy your time at Cambridge?
The Director of Music at that time was David Willcocks, revered and much loved by us all. Singing under his direction every day was a revelation, his way of working influencing me almost subconsciously. Opportunities at Cambridge were many and I started conducting the college choral society in my second year, and from then on, saw this as my future priority. I remember being involved in more than 20 concerts in each eight-week term as singer, pianist or conductor. On leaving King's, I became a lay clerk at Christ Church, Oxford which, then, was under the direction of Simon Preston, not at all similar to David Willcocks, but equally inspiring. The speed and precision of his rehearsals made a big impression.

When did you decide to become a conductor?
It was clear that I didn't want to become a singer (too much hard work!) or pianist. At that time, many ambitious and young, if totally inexperienced, conductors tried to find work as repetiteurs in one of the many German opera houses. I was fortunate enough to become the pianist for the 120-strong chorus at the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin.

Nothing could have been musically further away from King's! Precision and tuning seemed not to be priorities, rather expression and drama in the music. This was a jump from one extreme to the other. During this time I was involved in a great deal of other activities, accompanying, teaching Lieder, chamber music, contemporary music and, many times, playing keyboard instruments with the Berlin Philharmonic. I became chorusmaster in 1984, an extremely stressful job, with about 40 different operas each season, most of course in repertoire performances.

And following that enormous responsibility, new opportunities opened up?
In 1987 the opportunity arose to take over the RIAS Kammerchor. In Germany, there are six full-time professional radio choirs of differing sizes – Cologne, Munich, Stuttgart, Hamburg and two in Berlin. At that time, through the excellent work of my predecessor, Uwe Gronostay, the RIAS choir was beginning to sing with a less disturbing vibrato and more attention to detail than had until then been the case. English and Scandinavian influence certainly played an important role. Recording technique was beginning to favour a rounder acoustical sound, rather than using microphones very close to the singers. And it was from this time on that the whole choral scene in Europe started to change.

How does the choral scene in Europe compare with the UK?

Over the last 40 years the quantity and quality of choirs, professional, semi-professional and amateur, have been transformed. There are many 'project' choirs, mostly made up of freelance professional singers, whose presence in the continental musical scene has become a permanent fixture. Not only in Germany, but the international excellence to be found in Holland, Belgium and France, for example, not to mention that already established in Scandinavia, means that continental quality has arguably reached British standards. The cathedral tradition is of course a unique feature of British musical life. There are famous boys' choirs in Leipzig, Dresden and Regensburg, for example, which have long and proud histories, but are not involved in the daily Evensong routine and sight-reading is still some way behind on the continent! The amateur choral scene has also flourished. No longer a fun evening out for these singers, but for many a great deal of hard work and pride is involved. The standard of conductors has improved and many of the larger music academies now offer choral conducting courses. These have developed over the years, possibilities being given to the students to direct working choirs. For the best students, there are now several conducting competitions, some organised by the radio choirs. The proliferation of choir competitions has played a huge role in choral quality. The most famous is the Eric Ericson prize in Stockholm, but there are also many opportunities in Germany. This experience can lead to the beginning of a career, maybe a foot in the door in the professional scene. These competitions are hotly contested, and on the websites of many choirs, one will find a list of awards presented with no little pride. Not wishing to be too critical, I have never understood why young conductors are put in front of choirs in these competitions who already know the music. It is the working process from the very first rehearsal which determines how the 'tip of the iceberg' (ie the performance) is going to sound. It's this process which I'd been able to observe while singing under musicians like David Willcocks and Simon Preston.

I couldn't agree more: the importance of teaching is so critical for a conductor to understand. What aspects of choral training do you consider to be most important?

A cappella works pose the biggest challenge for a choral conductor – an understanding of how intonation works, the structure of chords, so that singers know what harmonic role they must contribute. The most talented conductors should be able to correct and influence intonation during a performance. Perfect pitch helps (!) but is not absolutely necessary. Many choirs in Germany are made up of singers of different nationalities. This means that particular attention must be given to vowel sounds, that they are uniform throughout the choir. Latin can pose problems. There seems to be a difference between north and south Germany as to the use of, for example, closed or open 'e' or 'o' vowels. Depending on which 'experts' one asks, different answers are often forthcoming. The conductor must decide! Working in opera has shown me many different possibilities of how one can use text pronunciation to enhance the musical and dramatic result. The shorter choral works of Brahms, for example, offer endless chances to experiment with the expressiveness of the texts he uses – just like the best Lieder singers.

► Conductor Marcus Creed

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It's a relief to hear that even Germans disagree about their own pronunciation! Your long and distinguished career in Europe as a conductor is a shining example to others. What advice would you give to aspiring young conductors?

Advice for young conductors is always a difficult subject. Everyone has different talents, everyone is presented with different possibilities and chances. When I came to Germany in 1976, the most popular route was to become a rehearsal pianist in an opera house. Many, later to become world-class conductors, took this path. One learns the repertoire, and maybe has the opportunity to conduct performances. In my case, it was through accompanying rehearsals, and standing in for absent or unwell conductors which gave me my breakthrough. There seem now to be more and more conductors who have played in orchestras, and somehow made the jump to the podium!

Have you composers who are particularly special to you?

As regards to composers for whom I have a particular admiration, apart from the well-known names, I've had many opportunities with the SWR Vokalensemble (the radio choir in Stuttgart) to conduct much modern music and many first performances. Ligeti, Kurtág, Nono and Heinz Holliger come to mind as being the most challenging and at the same time rewarding. What's also extremely interesting has been working together with composers on their new commissioned works. Many have never written for a professional choir before, sometimes no vocal music at all, so the process of bringing such works to performance can be stimulating for composer, conductor and choir.

I completely resonate with that having had 10 years with the BBC Singers and just how stimulating it is to be able to bring a composer's work to life. What was your bottom-line advice to those budding young conductors?

Take the plunge, come to Europe, learn a new language and culture, and experience a vast range of musical possibilities: I'm sure you won't regret it – I certainly haven't!

Marcus – thank you for sharing your fascinating thoughts and insights into a conductor's life in Europe. ■

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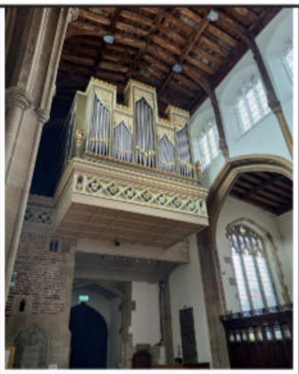

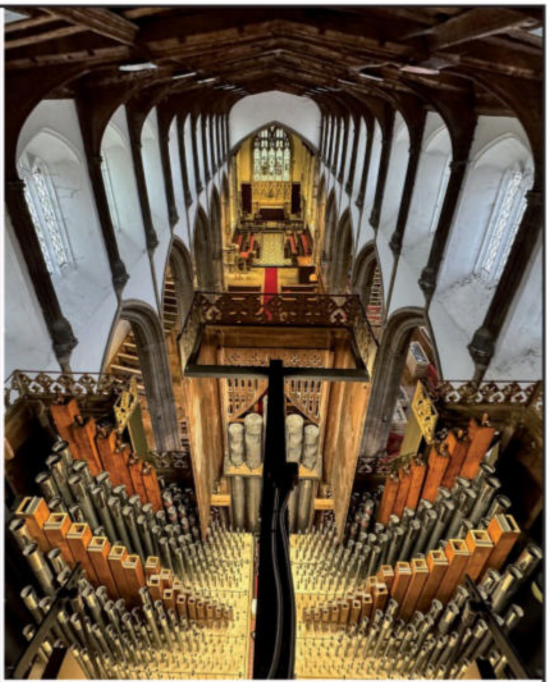

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In the vanguard of Organ Reform: the 1955 Holtkamp instrument at MIT Chapel

Voyage of discovery

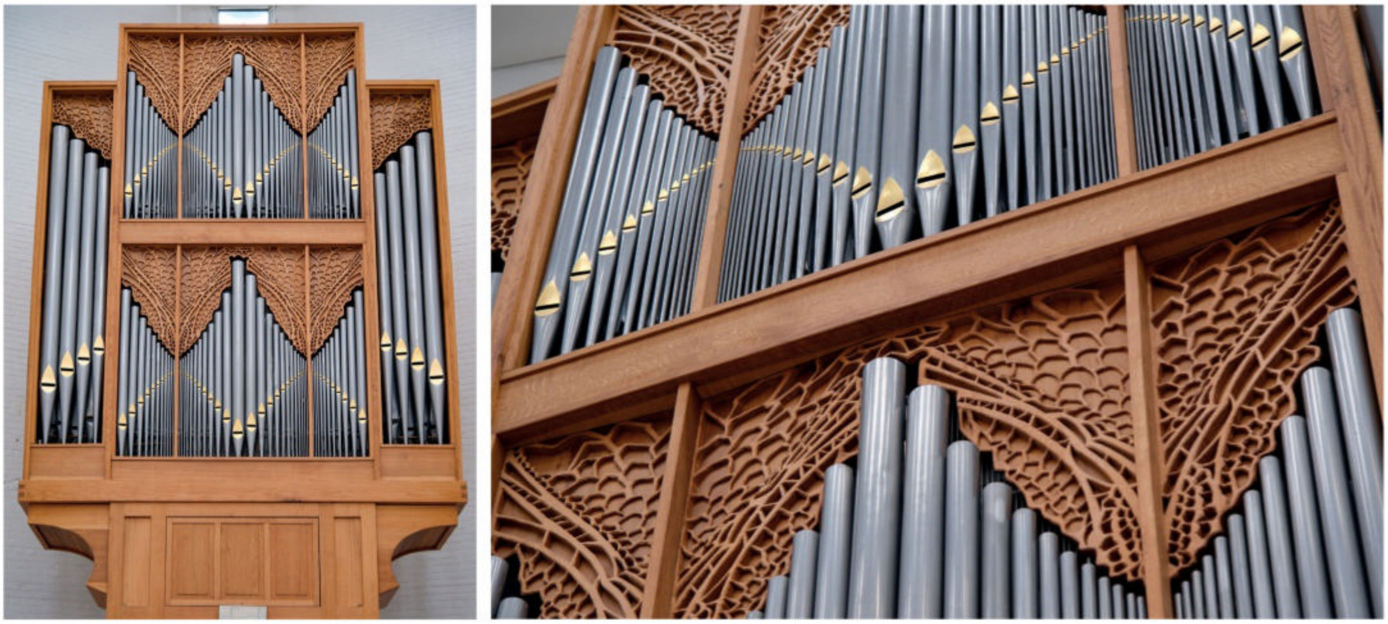
A fascination with American culture and organ music leads **Andrew Forbes** across the States to better understand their organ-building aesthetic. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Since childhood I've adored many aspects of mid-century America, revelling in the chrome-plated excitement of the space age, poring over Precisionist artwork, devouring Kerouac, Vonnegut, Salinger, and playing ever-increasing amounts of Barber, Sowerby, Copland through to Albright, Glass and Bolcom. Yet despite years of programming American organ repertoire, I had never encountered the instruments themselves on their home soil.

That changed earlier this year, thanks to a travelling scholarship from Scotland's Churches Trust, when I visited 37 instruments on a fortnight-long trip from Massachusetts to Tennessee. I began by first establishing a reference point in the hyper-symphonic aesthetic of the early 20th century; secondly by understanding the mid-century reaction against that; and then thirdly by exploring the movement of craft-based builders who, by revisiting historic principles to gain a more nuanced understanding than their forebears, have brought us to the present day. We have a parallel narrative in Britain, but I wondered where the differences lay, and what might have caused them.

In early April I found myself emerging from an underground bus station, bleary-eyed from jet lag and blinking at the bright morning sun, en route to Harvard University's Memorial Church. Completed in 1932, this Colonial Revival building houses a brace of organs: E M Skinner Opus 793 (1930) and C B Fisk Opus 139 (2012). The older of these provided the first reference point for my survey, oozing velvet-clad Romanticism through the grilles of its pipe chambers. Later in the trip I would encounter the magnificent 1932 Æolian organ at Duke University, and the Skinner instruments of All Saints, Ashmont (1929) and St Paul's, Winston-Salem (1928).

Organs by G Donald Harrison and Walter Holtkamp, two crucial vanguards of Organ Reform in the USA, began the second stage of my quest. A stop at MIT showed me two of Holtkamp's organs, which throw out the bathwater and baby of the Romantic aesthetic, quickly disposing of the entire ornate bathroom too. These first flourishes of reform would ultimately pave the way for a stream of instruments imported from continental Europe, arousing interest in mechanical action. Rudolf von Beckerath's 1957 instrument for Trinity Lutheran Church was followed by Harvard University's famed 1958 Flentrop, soon prompting Charles Fisk



▲ **After the revival of tracker action: John Brombaugh's 1979 organ for St Mark's Episcopal Chapel, Storrs, CT**

and Fritz Noack to set up their shops.

With the Tracker Revival well underway, stage three in my exploration started in Connecticut, where I met John Brombaugh's 1979 organ for St Mark's Episcopal Chapel, Storrs. This instrument makes an arresting visual impression, as the ordered rhythm of the façade's dark lead pipe flats is offset by the gilded mouths arranged in striking parabolas and organic tracery carved on the shades, leading me to wonder whether the instrument was crafted by tools or simply grew from seed.

Once on the bench, my ears were captivated by the combination of rich fundamental tone with flexuous, beguiling harmonic development; absent was the neoclassical aversion to richness. I explored more, finding further departures from the previous fashions: vigorous upperwork adds light to the leaded darkness, but with a deftness evocative of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro; and although the speech develops unhurriedly, it does so without gulping chiffs, slowly stabilising as if it were a human voice. There is something animate – raw, even – about this instrument. It vibrates with energy, but (like all good cult leaders) speaks with fascinating gravitas.

In the same year as Brombaugh completed this instrument, his friends and former colleagues George Taylor and John Boody opened their shop in Staunton, Virginia. This trio had all spent time poring over Schnitger pipework with Cor Edskes in their quest to 'unravel the neoclassical myth', as Jonathan Ambrosino eloquently describes it. By 1985, the Taylor & Boody firm were installing their Opus 9 at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. Inspired by the 1552 Niehoff case of St Johanniskirche, Lüneburg, this four-manual behemoth stands as tall as the ceiling, sailing like a galleon over the balustrade.

I found this sense of presence, of awe, heightened further by vast tonal scalings that gush immense flutey power, for the

▼ **Taylor & Boody's 1985 instrument at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, 'unravelling the neoclassical myth'**

College authorities wanted their chapel to resound with hearty congregational hymn-singing. This request, unorthodox for a Roman Catholic institution of the time, is far from the only apparent dissonance that this organ harmoniously resolves. That same dark, abundant plenum, for example, sits firmly in the North German tradition, yet is crowned with a narrow-scaled Rauschende Zimbel, exuding a silveriness more akin to Silbermann's low cut-ups. This supposedly incongruous stop complements the scheme magnificently, and I could hear it gilding everything while dominating nothing.

These organs don't claim to be reproductions, despite the vast amounts of research and historical precedent informing their design. They ask to be appreciated on their own merits, thanks to their (very considered) form of eclecticism, as does the later Richards, Fowkes & Co organ I visited at First Lutheran Church, Boston. On it, you can happily build a texture with Rückpositiv at the bottom and Pedal at the top, or vice-versa, meanwhile deploying the Werk's chorus to both support in the background and play out in the foreground of the Rückpositiv (thanks to the Dutch-inspired coupler mechanism). With seemingly endless combinations of colour and energy provided for in this 29-stop instrument, it demonstrates genius voicing and specification.

First Lutheran Church, Boston, Massachusetts

RICHARDS, FOWKES & CO, OP 10 (2000)

WERK

Bourdon	16
Principal	8
Viol d'Gamba	8
Rohrflöte	8
Octave	4
Spitzflöte	4
Nasat/III	3
Octave	2
Mixture	V
Trompet	8
Vox humana	8

RÜCKPOSITIV

Gedackt	8
Principal	4
Rohrflöte	4
Waldflöte	2
Sesquialtera	II
Scharff	IV
Dulcia	16
Krummhorn	8
Schalmei	4

PEDAL

Subbaß	16
Octave	8
Gedackt	8
Octave	4
Posaune	16
Trompet	8
Cornet	2

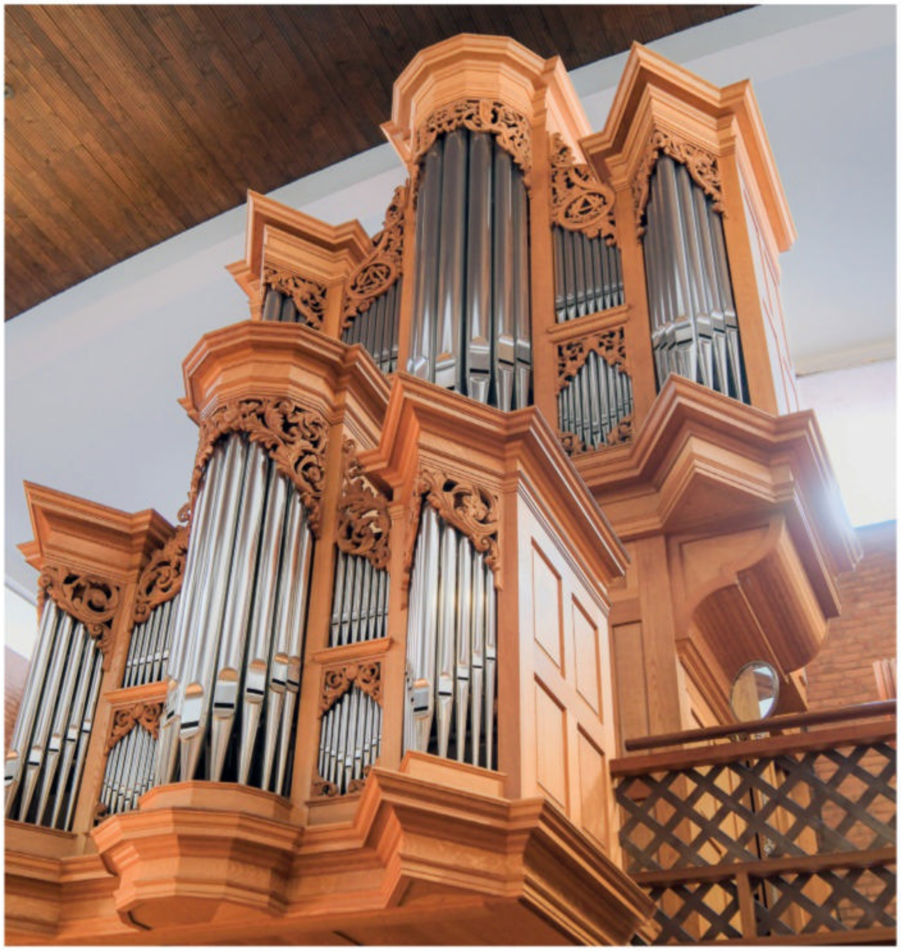
W/R, W/P, R/P
Tremulant
Cimbelstern
Temperament: Kellner

I played and played on it – Weckmann, Scheidt, Buxtehude, Bach – revelling in the perfectly finessed key action, cocooned with the Rückpositiv at my back, and soon lost the sense of any separation between player and instrument. I felt a DNA-level connection, packed with that same primal vitality I had encountered at Storrs.

Earlier in this article I dropped a breadcrumb with the mention of Fisk Opus 139, back at Harvard Memorial Church. Occupying prime position on the west gallery, this is a particularly lustrous example of the eclecticism for which the firm is renowned: its specification blends French manual order with English department names (even the Swell which otherwise looks, walks and talks like a Frenchman); the Positive (played from the middle manual) sounds distinctly German (yet sited within the main case, under expression); while the Great (the lowest manual) boasts four rather English-looking 8ft stops, but voiced in a way that suggests non-dom status and a season ticket for the Channel Tunnel. Oh, and did I mention that this mechanical action organ conveys the Swell's sound down from the attic via a tone chute? Ernest Skinner would be proud!

While this might initially appear another impossible mélange of identities, I found it to coalesce rather than confuse, in yet another example of how this current generation of

▼ At First Lutheran Church, Boston, the organ of 2000 from Richards, Fowkes & Co inspires a 'DNA-level' connection to the player



▲ **'Lustrous eclecticism' is achieved by C B Fisk's Op 139 at Harvard Memorial Church**

America's historically informed builders think: external influences are welcomed, explored, and once they are understood fully, a decision is made on whether they can be coherently incorporated. In this respect there is a synergy with their British counterparts, but also a key difference. For many of Britain's craft builders, primary inspiration is found in the Tudor and Classical English organ traditions. Over in the USA, however, the dominant inspirations seem almost exclusively German (North and South) and French (Classical and Symphonic), with occasional forays to Italy and Scandinavia. Signs of British influence are largely confined to the Victorian era.

A second distinction may be drawn across the Atlantic when looking across the whole timeline of my survey. The Inter-war years saw the USA, wind in its sails from Roosevelt's New Deal and a huge landmass rich in natural resource, building a head of steam while Britain languished in material shortages and stagnant markets. American organ builders had two decades' worth of head start by the time the UK sputtered back into life; we were slow out the gate of Organ Reform, and had serious catching-up to accomplish despite a stereotypical British aversion to change.

But change we did. Both countries have artisanal builders working with a deeper understanding of what came before, and a broader understanding of what is around. In this sense, firms from William Drake to C B Fisk, Goetze & Gwynn to the Noack Organ Company, are all magnificent representatives of the Information Age. Humanity is seeing a new 'Imagination Age' emerge though, characterised by advances in biotechnology and artificial intelligence. Augmented reality could already aid the design of casework and instrument layouts, and with further developments, organ builders might learn to consistently recreate the intensity of connection I experienced at the First Lutheran instrument. What will be the next big trend to emerge in organ building – and on which side of the pond will we see it first? ■

Andrew Forbes is Director of Music at Glasgow Cathedral. He is a trustee for the Scottish Federation of Organists, Scotland's Churches Trust, and is a founder of Sowne of Organe (a project surveying Scotland's historic organs)

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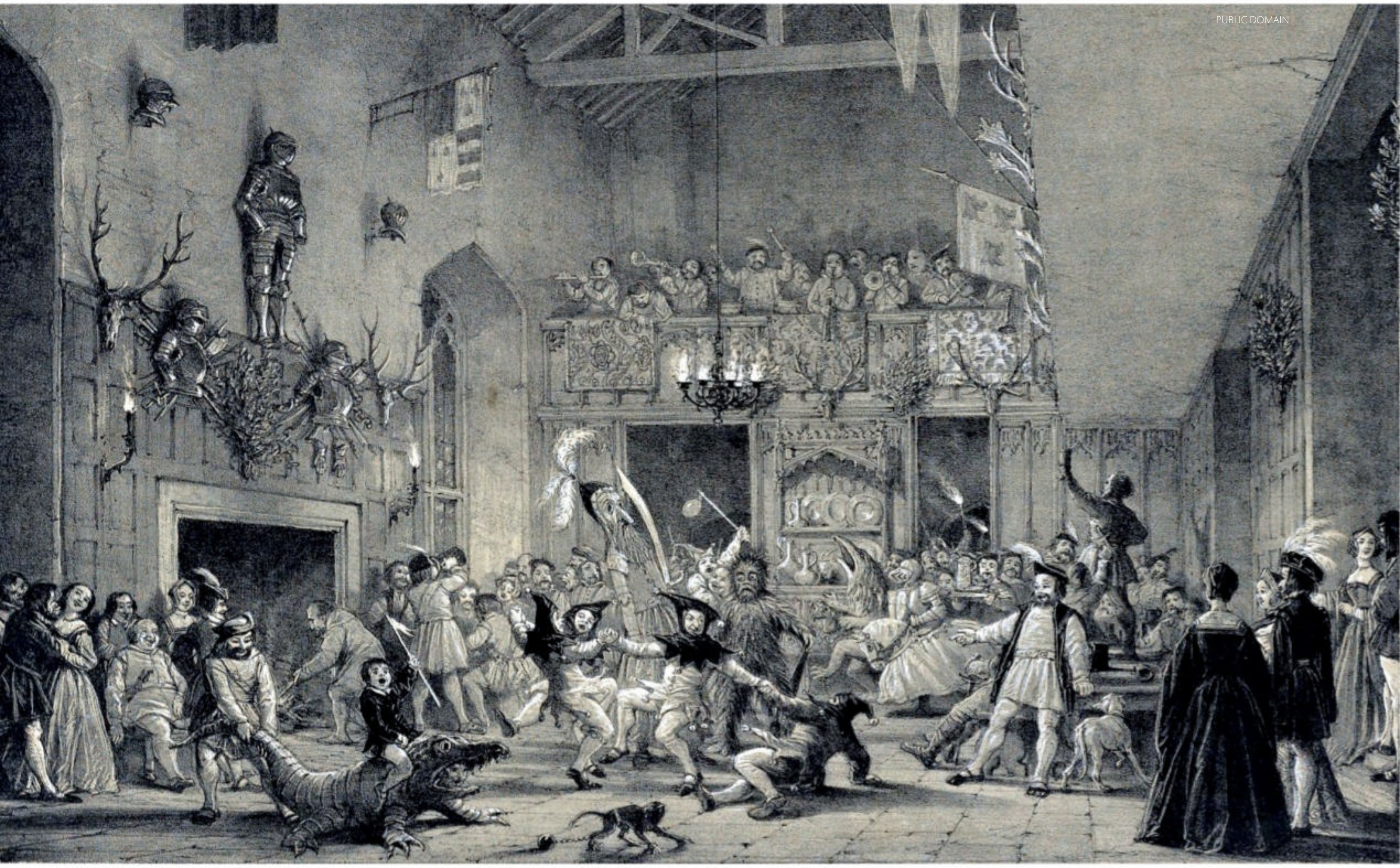
Stage and stall

Long before today's choristers filled cathedrals and schools with Advent carols, their Elizabethan predecessors were equally at home on the stage as in the stalls. **Matthew Blaiden** looks back at the role of chorister actors in the revels season



PUBLIC DOMAIN

These days, for countless choristers in cathedrals, other churches, and schools, the tradition is well established that the lead-up to Christmas (and sometimes for a period afterwards, too) involves careful preparation for and performing in a myriad of Advent and Christmas carol services and concerts, for all sorts of congregations and audiences. About 450 to 500 years ago, however, choristers such as those from the Chapel Royal and St Paul's Cathedral had not only to prepare and sing for the liturgical occasions of the season, but also rehearse and perform plays. They performed frequently before the monarch at Court as part of the Court's Christmas-time season of 'revels' and entertainments. Especially from about the mid-1570s to about 1590, and again from just before 1600 for over a decade, also in relatively small commercial theatres (or 'playhouses') for paying public audiences.

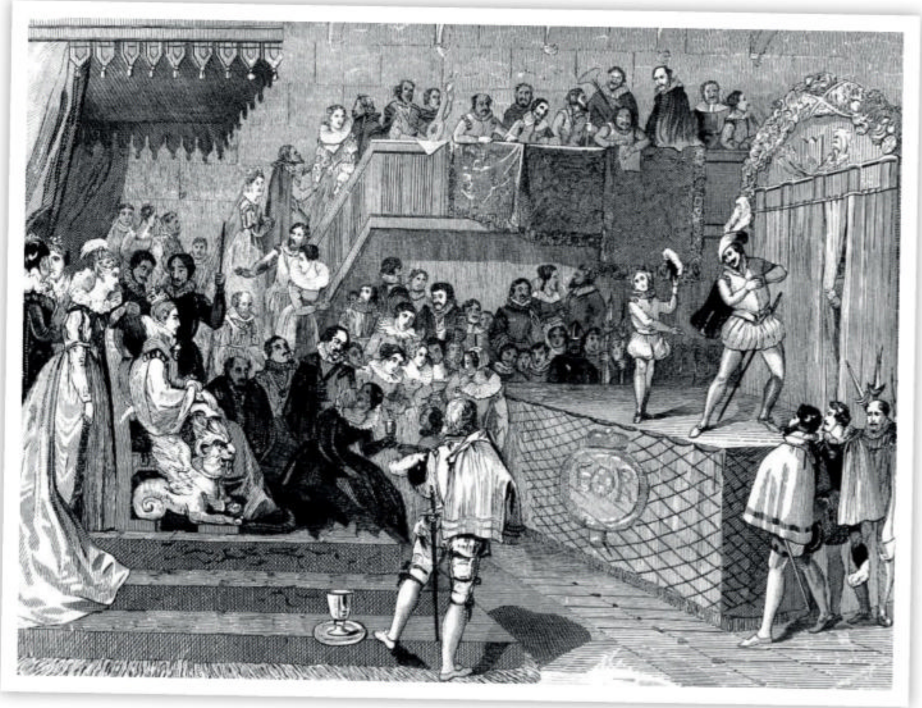
These chorister actors were one variety of the larger phenomenon of the early modern English theatre, the boy actor. While women and girls did perform on the early modern stage in certain settings, the professional and commercial public stages featured exclusively male actors and would do so until the later 17th century. So, boy actors were to be found playing predominantly female and youthful characters in so-called 'adult' troupes, as well as playing all or most of the parts in all-boy companies and their plays in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Especially in the 16th century, boy companies tended to be run under the auspices of, or have origins and ties with, either grammar schools such as Merchant Taylors' or Westminster – where drama held an important place in education, not least for the opportunity it provided for practising skills of oratory – or choral institutions like the Chapel Royal or St Paul's Cathedral. But the plays these companies put on were not the early modern equivalent of modern school plays; they were more often than not sophisticated pieces of theatre that would catch the attention of the public and the Court – and audiences centuries later – as serious, worthwhile entertainment.

It was the companies primarily of chorister boys, those from the Chapel Royal and especially those from St Paul's, that would become the most prominent of the Elizabethan boy companies. Especially through the earlier part of Elizabeth I's reign, boy companies became among the most frequently featured performers of plays in Court revels seasons, alongside masques and other courtly entertainment, and far outnumbering appearances by adult companies sponsored by nobles. From the later 1570s, they remained frequent performers in Court revels even as there were fewer masques and more performances by adult companies; but the boy companies from the Chapel Royal and St Paul's also started performing in what were operated as small commercial theatres admitting the public for a charge, officially under licence to practise for appearing at Court.

Around the turn of the 1580s, the Chapel children were performing under the management of Richard Farrant (the composer of now well-known anthems *Lord, in thy tender mercy*, *Call to remembrance*, and *Hide not thou thy face*, he was deputy to Chapel Royal's Master of the Choristers, William Hunnis, having previously been Master of the Choristers at St George's, Windsor) in an adapted room in the Blackfriars precinct; and the St Paul's boys were performing under their Master, Sebastian Westcott, somewhere in the Cathedral precinct (the exact location is not known but has been the subject of several ingenious scholarly theories).

Farrant died in 1580, however, as did Westcott in 1582, so the companies seem to have merged briefly and performed together at Court and in Blackfriars. But from 1584, the Chapel children seem to have ceased performing regularly, and the Paul's boys returned to performing frequently both at court and in their playhouse at Paul's until their apparent suppression in 1590 after the Martin Marprelate affair. Between them, these companies performed some of the earliest commercial plays in the period that survive to this day – surviving because they were some of the first commercial plays to reach print – including, particularly notably, almost all the innovative, metamorphic plays of John Lyly.

These boy companies did not perform for most of the 1590s, but they were resurrected around 1598-9, beginning this new phase of their activity performing plays by, among others, Ben Jonson and John Marston, often satirical or comic but also including deeply moving tragedies. The Children of St Paul's returned to the Cathedral precinct and remained active until 1606; meanwhile, those from the Chapel Royal (under various names, including the Children of the Queen's Revels) performed in a larger second Blackfriars playhouse until 1608 (when Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, took over the theatre), after which they moved to the Whitefriars theatre before finally ceasing performing in 1616.



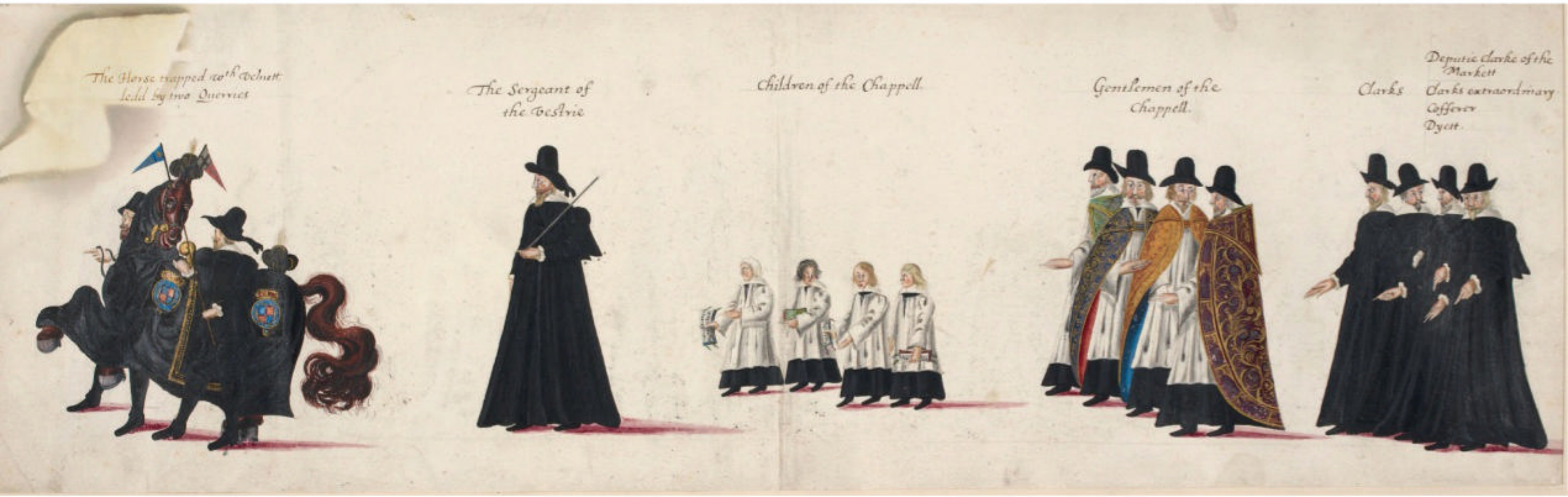
PUBLIC DOMAIN

▲ A Court revels performance

It used to be thought that because of the fact of them being boys, these boys and their plays were in some way unskilled, without depth, or similarly inferior to 'adult' companies' plays. But this view is incompatible with a lot of what we know about these plays and performers. For a start, the very concept of 'boy'-hood was not stable in this period (if it ever has been), and so what it means for our conception of these performers' activities is far from simple. This complication is illustrated not least, and most concretely, by the fact that chorister boys are known sometimes to have stayed in the care of their Masters – and around and probably performing with the companies – through and after their voice changes, and at different times these companies seem to have had members as young as seven and as ▹

'In early years of Elizabeth I's reign, boy companies became the most frequently featured performers of plays in Court revels seasons'

PUBLIC DOMAIN


The Horse trapped wth Velvett ledd by two Querries
The Sergeant of the Vestrie
Children of the Chappell
Gentlemen of the Chappell
Clarks
Deputie clarke of the Markett
Clarks extraordinary
Cofferer
Dyett

▲ **A drawing of choristers at Queen Elizabeth 1's funeral**

◁ old as 22. The instability of 'boy'-hood was also partly what enabled – despite as well as provoking criticism at the time – these boy actors to take on such a huge variety of roles, including female roles, that often involved cross-gender and cross-age dressing and acting, complicating binary conceptions of gender and its presentation and performance. Also, their plays could place at times immense demands – in acting, musically, verbally, physically, emotionally, and more – on their performers, of which we have gained particularly acute appreciation in recent years through work and performances by Edward's Boys, a modern company of boys who are pupils at King Edward VI School in Stratford-upon-Avon led by Perry Mills. And this focus on boy and chorister companies is to say nothing of the presence of boys in 'adult' companies, often playing significant and demanding female roles such as Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

The high levels of skill – from verbal and oratorical, through emotionally complex acting, to the physical and musical – on display in many boy company plays has been shown particularly in some of the most recent research on boy actors by Dr Harry McCarthy and Dr Hannah Wilson. McCarthy has drawn special attention to how boy actors-were frequently required to be physically virtuosic in their performances, in how they moved and in the execution of athletic and sporting activity on stage. Closer to musical concerns, while some scholars have suggested that a reason for the boy chorister acting companies' commercial success was likely to have been their reputation as liturgical singers, Wilson has explored the nature of boys' musical education and experience (such as its foundations in learning 'pricksong') and shown how this can be seen to shape the musical elements found in plays involving boy actors. This includes elements that exploit a range of musical skill levels that would have been found in these companies, from those still learning to advanced singers. And these elements could take a number of forms: for example, sometimes plays featured sung duets where duet partners have either equal or unequal musical responsibility and demands, or call-and-response moments that could draw on musical experience of responsorial forms of choral music. Moments that both draw on skills learnt in musical training and, by creating opportunities to practise these skills in another context, could have fed back into their musical activity, too – as well as opportunities for virtuosic vocal display by a solo performer. Wilson shows how these boys' musical education also underpinned dancing on stage, and sat alongside – rather than in opposition to – proficient acting ability.

Elizabethan chorister actors' musical and theatrical activities may at first glance seem worlds apart. But, in fact, they seem to have been quite intertwined. It would be tempting to say that their role and activity as choristers singing in the liturgy would have been their – and their masters' – top priority. Perhaps it (often) was. But their theatrical activity – which drew on and could even have shaped in turn their musical performing – clearly became significant enough to attract royal invitations to perform at Court, royal licence to perform in public, to attract commercial audiences, for their commercial plays to be among the first to be printed, and to be suppressed and resurrected. Elizabethan choristers, then, were established performers in several kinds. ■

'The boys' musical education also underpinned dancing on stage, and sat alongside – rather than in opposition to – proficient acting ability'

Interested readers should first consult the most recent book on boy actors, Harry R McCarthy's Boy Actors in Early Modern England: Skill and Stagecraft in the Theatre *(Cambridge University Press), which is out in paperback and whose references and bibliography outline the precedent field helpfully. Hannah Wilson's doctoral thesis is currently under embargo, but she is working on converting the thesis into a published book. We are grateful to Hannah Wilson for sharing her work and giving permission to mention it here.*

Matthew Blaiden is director of music at St Stephen with St John, Westminster. Having done research towards a PhD on early modern drama, he is now pursuing a PGCE in English at the Institute of Eductation at UCL.

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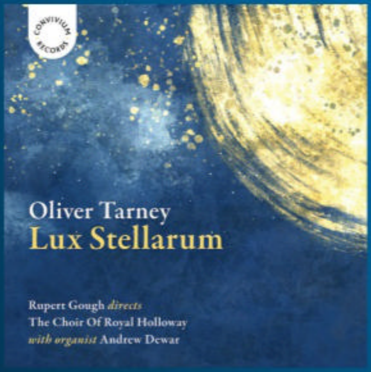
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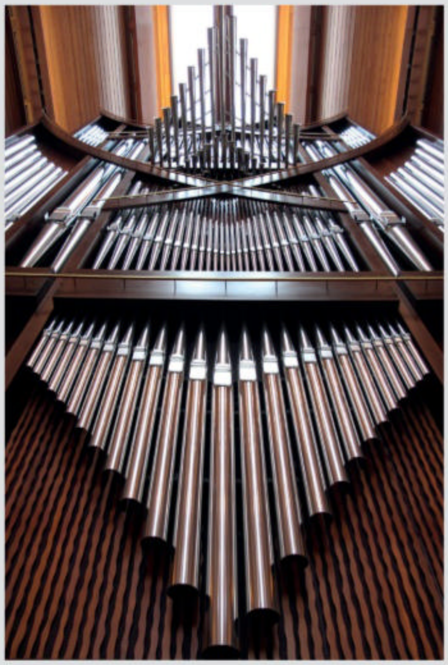

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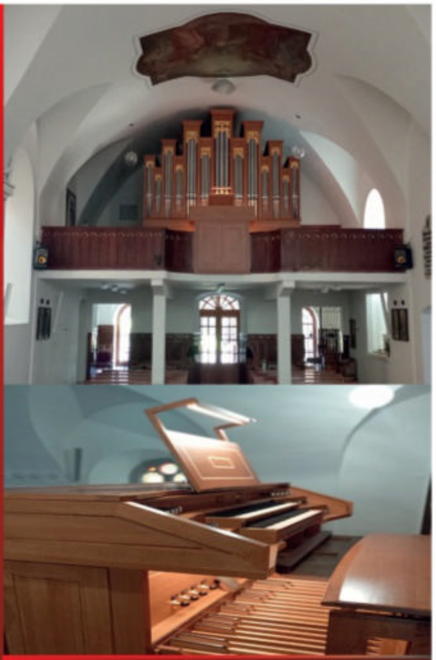

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Opus 503, 2025
22/II+Ped.

Choral Communities

After 90 years, Northampton Bach Choir looks ahead to the future of choral singing. **Clare Stevens** traces the growth of the NBC, discovering how it was – and continues to be – shaped by the changing world around us

Part 4 Then sing we all

Now let us make a merry greeting,
And thank good fortune for our meeting,
Our hearts are full of joy and pleasure,
Since thou art here our only treasure.
Now will we dance and sport and play,
And sing a merry roundelay.
Then sing we all.

On one of the very hottest days of the very hot summer of 2025, when appealing options for Saturday evening entertainment included lying in a darkened room with a fan and a cold beer, a large number of people loyally chose to take their seats in Christ Church, Northampton for the final concert in Northampton Bach Choir (NBC)'s 90th anniversary season. They were rewarded with a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

Previous concerts in the season had included a Remembrance-themed concert the previous November, and Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in March. For their summer concert, Musical Director Simon Toyne took the choir – and its audience – out of their musical comfort zone with a jazz-inflected programme consisting of Will Todd's *Mass in Blue*, commissioned by Hertfordshire Chorus in 2003, and Iain Farrington's *Then Sing We All*, from which the above quotation is taken, commissioned for the centenary of Teddington Choral Society in 2022.

Seated next to the friendly wife of one of the choir members, I learned that although NBC has a very varied repertoire including plenty of new music, the singers had never done anything quite like these two pieces. They had found the music hard to learn at first and it had required a lot of work at home between their weekly rehearsals, but they had enjoyed the challenge and really liked both pieces. Evidence of their hard work was obvious from the excellent diction, and the fact that most of the singers were watching their conductor attentively most of the time and really responsive to him and to the music.

It helped that the accompaniment was provided by the excellent Jem Lowther Jazz Trio, whose eponymous pianist is also the choir's regular repetiteur. The spectacular soprano solos in *Mass in Blue* were taken by

▲ Northampton Bach Choir performing at its 2025 summer concert at Christ Church, Northampton

British-Jamaican Sophie Taylor-Denton, who really made the most of her cadenzas, visibly relishing the effect as they rang around the church's lofty ceiling. 'Fantastic', shouted one audience member at the conclusion of the piece, heralding enthusiastic applause and a sense that everyone on stage and off was really buzzing throughout the interval.

Then Sing We All is a cantata in seven movements exploring the joy of singing together in the light of the Covid pandemic and its terrible effect on choirs – though the texts are all drawn from the 16th and 17th centuries. Most are anonymous, but two are by Thomas Nashe and the central movement sets Robert Herrick's *To Music*. The cantata is quite substantial, with a wonderfully reflective penultimate movement, but the overall mood is celebratory, so it was an ideal choice for this concert.

NBC gave its first concert on Palm Sunday, 1935, and its history since then has been closely linked to the venue for that first performance, St Matthew's Church, famous for its nurturing of the arts. Benjamin Britten wrote his Festival Cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb* for St Matthew's choir in 1943 at the request of the then vicar, Revd Canon Walter Hussey, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the consecration of the church. Subsequently, new works have been commissioned by St Matthew's from many other composers, including Gerald Finzi, Edmund Rubbra, Lennox Berkeley, Kenneth Leighton and David Bednall. It has a very fine Walker organ and its most celebrated treasures are a Madonna and Child sculpture by Henry Moore and a Crucifixion painting by Graham Sutherland, both commissioned by Canon Hussey in 1943 and 1946 respectively.

NBC's founding conductor, Denys Pouncey, was organist of St Matthew's, but only a year after the choir's first concert he was appointed as organist and master of the choristers at Wells Cathedral. His successor in Northampton was Philip Pfaff, whose greatest claim to fame was as the music teacher of the future composer Malcolm Arnold, who in 1938 played principal trumpet in NBC's first performance of Pfaff's new edition of Handel's *Messiah*.

Since then NBC has had a quite extraordinary roster of Music Directors who went on to distinguish themselves in significant posts or to do interesting things, including John Bertalot, Michael Nicholas, Stephen Cleobury, Timothy Day, Simon Johnson, Richard Tanner and Andrew Reid. David Temple, NBC's music director 1995-97, gave them an early experience of the work of Will Todd, commissioning *The Burning Road*, a cantata telling the story of the Jarrow Marchers, who passed through Northampton in 1936 on their way to lobby parliament in protest against unemployment and poverty in the north-east of England. NBC premiered the piece in Northampton's Derngate Theatre, another of its regular performing venues, and performed it again the following year in Durham Cathedral.

Lee Dunleavy directed the choir between 2007 and 2022; for the first few years of his tenure, he was also Director of Music at another of Northampton's historic churches, All Saints' in the city centre – where the current musical incumbent is Jem Lowther. There is a lot of overlap in Northampton's musical and church communities!

In 2008 NBC set out to give premiere performances of some of the most inspirational new choral-orchestral music from living composers working in North America. Over one hundred works were studied, from which a shortlist was drawn up, and five premiere performances scheduled over five years, of substantial pieces by Craig Phillips, David Conte, Dan Forrest, Stephen Chatman and Steve Dobrogosz.

To mark its 75th anniversary year the choir continued its commitment to performing music by living composers by commissioning carols from Simon Johnson, Edmund Jolliffe, Gordon Lawson, Michael Nicholas, and Dunleavy himself. When he moved away to study for the priesthood, Dunleavy's long service to the choir was acknowledged with the title of Conductor Emeritus. Together with Chris Ouvry-Johns, Laura Bailie and Hilary Punnett, Simon Toyne was one of four guest conductors for an interim season of concerts and cathedral evensongs before being appointed as Musical Director from September 2023.

Toyne's roles as executive director of music of the David Ross Educational Trust (DRET), an academy chain of 34 state primary and secondary schools in London, the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and as a director of the Rodolfus Foundation Choral Courses, have brought a new network of connections to NBC and helped to stimulate a broadening of the choir's demographic.

This is most noticeable in the soprano section, where the front row at the concert I attended included two young teenage girls and an 11-year-old, all singing their hearts out. Rhoda and Ruth encountered the choir when their dad joined the second bass section; they liked what they heard and thought they would like to join too. The logistics of accepting such young members caused considerable discussion at the choir's

'NBC has clearly rebuilt very successfully from that great silence of 2020-21, relishing the joy of sharing music together'

▲ NBC members rehearsing for a Remembrance event in November 2024

AGM, but with many teachers involved in the organisation the safeguarding requirements are well understood and in place.

Ruth's first concert was *The Creation* in 2023; Rhoda recalls that she loved singing Mozart's Requiem last year. Their father speaks passionately, even bluntly, about how this culture of choral singing will die unless it is actively nurtured by initiatives like this: 'We're only 15 years of funerals away from not being a viable group'. A Salvation Army bandsman who grew up near Wrexham on the Welsh borders, he discovered classical music by accident when he realised he was singing hymns to classical tunes such as Mozart's *Ave verum*. He loves sharing the experience of being part of NBC with his daughters ('the only down side is that, because I'm standing behind them, I don't get to see their faces!') and would like to see more children being welcomed to rehearsals, and groups from the choir going into schools. No doubt that sort of activity is on Simon Toyne's wish list too. Over coffee ahead of the concert he told me that he is also targeting 40-50-year-olds who may have stopped singing when their children were small but now deserve a weekly night out.

Other recent recruits include one of Toyne's colleagues from DRET, who says he is new to choral singing and really loving it, and Sarah Wise, NBC's chair, who works for the county music service. She started a community choir for the parents who sat in their cars on Saturdays outside a local music centre while their children were having lessons and ensemble rehearsals; and to cut a long story short that led to her joining NBC just two years ago.

'We're only 15 years of funerals away from not being a viable group'

Noticing the choir's colourful floral corsages that give a summery feel to their concert black attire, I'm told that Wise made them all herself from individual silk flowers ordered in haste online after the choir decided that the sopranos and altos shouldn't wear summer dresses for this concert because they wanted to have new formal photographs taken for their updated website: 'My hands are aching from putting together so many of them, but it was worth it!'

As this issue of *C&O* went to press, NBC was preparing for a sight-singing workshop with Ralph Allwood and a concert on 15 November pairing Cecilia McDowall's *Da Vinci Requiem* with Brahms's *Schicksaslied. Messiah* in March 2026 and Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle* lie ahead. Catching up after the summer, Wise was keen to tell me that they have engaged opera singer Rebecca Bottone as musician in residence: 'She lives in Northampton and is keen to support the music making in the town. She came to our second rehearsal of the term when we were revisiting Iain Farrington's piece, which we performed in the Market Square in September as part of the events commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of Northampton. She gave us some performance tips that really made the piece come alive.'

As Simon Toyne pointed out to the audience at the summer concert I attended, the devastation caused by the fire that destroyed almost all of Northampton's town centre was not unlike the devastation caused to the choral community by Covid-19, so the piece has relevance to both contexts. NBC has clearly rebuilt very successfully from that great silence of 2020-21, relishing the joy of sharing music together, being a choral community and passing the baton on to future generations. ■

northamptonbachchoir.org.uk

Clare Stevens works as a writer, editor and publicist in the Welsh Marches

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ADOBE STOCK

Heaven touches earth

As the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge releases a luminous new Christmas recording, director of music Christopher Gray speaks to **Hattie Butterworth** about the choir's distinctive sound, the magic of Christmas and authenticity at the heart of its music

Ask Christopher Gray what makes the Choir of St John's Cambridge special, and his answer comes without hesitation. 'I think that's really the key to this whole unusual choir,' he says. 'There's an authenticity about the way that we're not looking to make everyone sound the same. It's more about, what's your natural voice? When you take the tension away and you're relaxed, what does your instrument naturally do? That's got to be the best way of expressing. And then the next step is, what are you expressing through that instrument?'

The Choir of St John's College admitted the first girls into its choir in 2022 – just three years ago. I tell Gray that it makes me happy to hear young female chorister voices coming through on the new Christmas album, *O Holy Night*, especially in the solo in John Rutter's *There is a flower*. It reminds me of what Rutter has often said of the inclusion of female voices: 'Not better, but different – like two different organ stops.'

I meet Gray for a tour of the college at the very end of September. As we walk around the historic maze, he shows me the route the choristers take from their school to rehearsals, as well as the famous bridge which forms the red logo of the choir. We end up in Gray's office, just off the main John's courtyard. The sun shines through as we ponder on the repertoire, sound and spirituality of Advent and Christmas. I suspect it's something he gives frequent thought.

NORDIN CATIC

▲ Director of music at St John's, Christopher Gray

Gray joined the college in 2023 with the definition of a tough act to follow: the legacy of his predecessor Andrew Nethsingha, and his remarkable recording oeuvre. Gray's first album of contemporary choral music, *Lament & Liberation*, came earlier this year and now, *O Holy Night* is their gift for the festive season.

Gray tells me he approached the new album as a carefully constructed journey through the Christmas story. 'The repertoire is taken from our December tours,' he explains, 'but I've selected particular pieces I thought would work well on an album. I've given a lot of thought to how it will run – so if you just press play and listen to the whole thing, you'll hopefully find the right variety, and that the keys flow naturally from one to another. Broadly speaking, it starts with the birth – *O Holy Night* – and moves through to the visit of the Wise Men.'

Skim through the album's track list and many familiar favourites jump out, such as the Howells 'Three Carol Anthems' and Poulenc Motets, but Gray insists that tradition must never stand still. 'We can't just freeze the repertoire at one moment in time,' he says. 'We have to keep adding new works – so we've included pieces that are established but maybe not household names yet, alongside familiar friends. Christmas is about that mix of discovery and familiarity.'

As we dive deep into the repertoire, it's clear that for Gray, the beauty of Christmas music lies in its balance between celebration and reflection. 'There's the tinsel side, of course – the joy of this child's birth – but you can't really have 70 minutes of just that. The interesting stuff is in the profundity of texts like *O Magnum Mysterium*, this great mystery that God, who created the universe, would be born in such a humble way. That's profound.'

Gray has established himself as a champion of contemporary music and has maintained relationships with a wide variety of composers, many from his time as director of music at Truro Cathedral. Among the contemporary voices featured on this album is Tamsin Jones, whose *Noel: Verbum caro factum est* caught Gray's imagination. 'It takes some of the traditional elements of carols from the Middle Ages and reclothes them in a slightly modern way,' he says. 'It's got a macaronic text – Latin and English together – and that medieval spirit gives it a particular smell, if you like.'

Cornish composer Becky McGlade also contributes a new setting of *In the Bleak Midwinter*. 'Her carol is nothing like the Holst or the Darke, but it's utterly beautiful in its own way,' Gray says warmly. 'It brings something quite profound to those words – though I like the fact I can't quite find a word for it.'

The choir also promotes composer Errollyn Wallen, whose *Peace on Earth* appears on the album – and who is writing them a new piece for their renowned Advent Carol Service. 'Errollyn wrote both the words and the music,' Gray explains of *Peace on Earth*. 'On the page the text seems simple – some Christmas imagery and a plea for peace on earth – but the way she sets it is haunting. There's a kind of bittersweetness in the harmony, and it leaves you wondering what peace on earth really means, both 2,000 years ago and now.'

KEITH HEPPELL

▲ 'This is a choir where people sing with their full voices': The Choir of St John's Cambridge

'The interesting stuff is in the profundity of texts like O Magnum Mysterium – this great mystery, that God who created the universe would be born in such a humble way' That's profound.'

That commitment to contemporary writing, Gray says, is essential. 'We can't freeze the tradition in time. It's a living, breathing thing. And it's enlivening for a choir to work with a living composer – to bring something new into being.'

But the older repertoire which remains at the heart of the album still has a lot to say. Gray's interpretation often feels as though it breathes and adds extra space, especially to the Poulenc pieces. 'Poulenc's motets are fascinating,' Gray says. 'He can say a lot with just one chord – the harmonies, the textures, the quirky phrase lengths. It's witty, festive, and profound all at once.'

Howells, too, has a special resonance. 'He was here at St John's during the Second World War, so there's a personal connection. His carols are endlessly challenging, but what's most important is capturing the spirit of the text. When we did *Here is the Little Door*,

▶

KEITH HEPPELL

▲ **Composer Errollyn Wallen has been commissioned to write a work for the renowned annual St John's Advent Carol Service**

we talked about what the Magi would have felt after that long journey – the moment before lifting the latch and going through. Howells captures that perfectly.'

I'm often struck by how young choristers are coached to take on big solos or perform under pressure. I ask Gray, thinking specifically about that solo in *O Holy Night*: 'In rehearsals each day, I make nearly every chorister sing on their own. They're used to it, and there's no feeling of pressure. It's just part of the culture. I might ask someone to demonstrate a passage because I've heard something in their voice I'd like the group to hear. We think about it together and celebrate it.'

That process bore fruit in the recording of *O Holy Night* itself. 'Every choir has big solos on big occasions,' says Gray. 'Monty, who sang the *O Holy Night* solo, is very calm when there's a microphone on. He's very good at being in the moment of the music and the text he's singing. His musical instincts were by far the most important thing – our job is mostly to create a clear path for those instincts to be released.'

But when the pressure gets too much and things inevitably do go wrong, how does Gray communicate with his choir? 'I've got a long list of very, very distinguished former members of the choir who have got stuff wrong, so I will tell them that!

'We all get stuff wrong, and it's not about not making mistakes,' Gray asserts. 'It's a good opportunity, because for those of them that do go into music, they mustn't get in the habit of worrying every time they get something slightly wrong. They've got to wear that lightly, or else it's going to be crippling.'

Ultimately, *O Holy Night* isn't just a Christmas album – it's a portrait of a living musical organism. 'This is a choir where people sing with their full voices,' Gray says. 'It's amazing how well you can balance and blend while still letting people sing properly. That's why so many of our alumni have gone on to careers as soloists – they've learned to express text and emotion just as they would in opera or song.'

Gray admits that finding time for his own contemplation can be challenging, but that it's imperative that he finds some 'protected time' for being able to enter into the text and energy of a performance. One of my final questions is to ask him what Christmas means to him.

'If you ask any of my chorus that question, what does Mr Gray think is the essence of Christmas, they'll tell you,' Gray smiles. 'I always tell them, because it goes across a lot of what we sing. It's a sentence I heard the Canon Precentor in Truro say when I was there. I asked him this question, and he said 'When heaven touches earth' – that's what Christmas is. And that's what we're trying to capture, in every note.' ■

O Holy Night *is out now on the Choir of St John's Cambridge label. sjcchoir.co.uk*

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Truro Cathedral Choir

James Anderson-Besant (director)
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Truro Cathedral Choir
James Anderson Besant
HOPE SOARS ABOVE
Music by
GIBBONS
BYRD
TOMKINS
BULL

REGCD599

Building on Regent's long-standing and fruitful association with Truro Cathedral Choir, we are delighted to release the first recording of the choir under its recently-appointed Director of Music, James Anderson- Besant. Released for the 400th anniversary of the death of Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625) this year, the recording juxtaposes sacred choral and solo organ works by Gibbons himself with those by his contemporaries William Byrd, John Bull, and Thomas Tomkins. Included are two of Gibbons's most popular Evening Services, together with both popular and rarely-recorded anthems by three of the most famous English composers of the first quarter of the 17th century. The recording also features three solo organ works, two of which are played on the historic John Byfield organ in St Mary's Aisle of the Cathedral, which contains pipework dating from 1750.

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Rockey Sun Keting

Blood Moon

A light and airy choral texture is achieved through scat syllables in a new choral piece from Rockey Sun Keting. She talks to **Matthew Power**

Born in Xi'an, China, Rockey Sun Keting graduated this year from the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) with a PhD in composition. How did that trajectory begin? 'I started learning piano when I was even younger than four, I think.' Weekly lessons continued with teachers from Xi'an Conservatory until the age of 12. The intensity of the Chinese school system meant that she had to drop her extra-curricular activities and concentrate on academic work, though playing the piano continued.

'School was intense. But by the time I was 14, I couldn't see a clear path for me that didn't involve music.' With her parents' blessing, Rockey returned to the conservatory with renewed zeal, but found that learning classical repertoire was not fulfilling her yearning to be a musician. 'I loved music so much, and I wanted to create something myself; and I knew that I didn't want to play Beethoven or Mozart for another year.'

After reading for an undergraduate music degree at the Shanghai Conservatory (in China a music degree takes five years), she came to London for postgraduate studies. 'My years at the Academy have been my hardest work. I had to constantly produce pieces for endless deadlines. I appreciated that experience because it meant I could develop in a very short, intense period.' Rockey describes her undergraduate education as building the foundations, and her RAM studies (nine years in total for a master's degree and a PhD, albeit with the pandemic interrupting) gave her the opportunity to write music regularly and hear it performed and recorded. As well as her musical development, Rockey found the move from Shanghai to London a culture shock. 'It required me to think beyond the music I was writing. It developed my overall artistry, not just my composition skills.'

▲ Studying Eastern philosophy helped Rockey Sun Keting find her own artistic identity

Tangram is an artists' collective specialising in multidisciplinary and cross-cultural productions; Rockey is a co-director there, working with Alex Ho [*C&O* March 2022, pp 46-47]. 'I joined Tangram as a composer in 2019, then sat in as a co-director when one of the co-founders left.' Working creatively with Alex is proving to be a fruitful partnership. 'We have different backgrounds, but that makes us a perfect team to tell the stories of the Chinese diaspora through a modern lens, and we share an interest in stage works.'

Rockey says that musical inspiration often comes from observation: it could be an event, a philosophical concept, something in the natural world or a sacred pattern. 'When I moved to London, I felt like I almost had to grab onto something tangible to help me realise who I am and what I'm doing. So I studied Eastern philosophy and Buddhism. That taught me what it means to be present and to observe – instead of getting too involved with one's own thoughts and situation.' Regular meditation led to Eastern philosophical concepts providing the inspiration for almost everything she wrote, including the context of her doctoral studies. 'Sometimes it gives me a concrete structure; sometimes it gives me the flow of the piece; sometimes it gives me almost a physical concept of the music.' Listening to some of her recent compositions reveals a flexible ability to embrace and manipulate diverse musical styles and textures, as well as finding inspiration from a variety of sources.

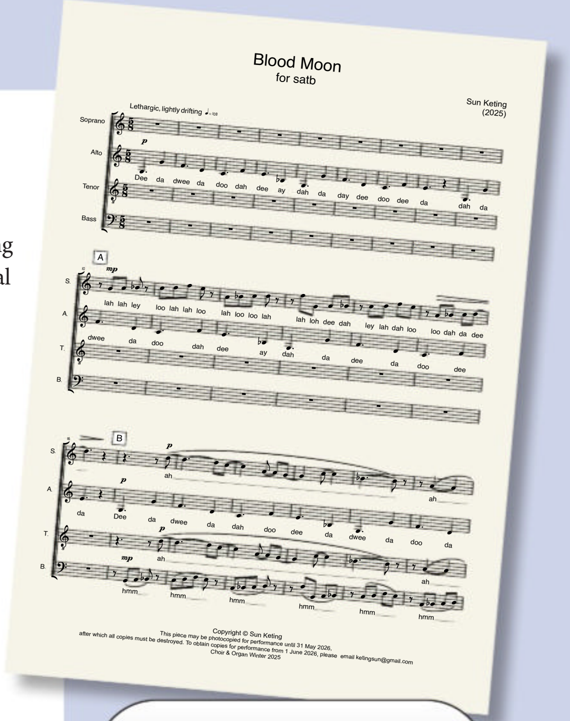
Tang (for 17-piece ensemble, 2022) was written while she attended the composition and performance course at the Britten Pears Young Artist Programme, and premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in 2023. Its soundworld captures the essence of the Tang dynasty of 1400 years ago, emulating the percussive and string timbres of the ancient Tang Chang'an style of court music. Yet it manages to combine this with rhythmic and harmonic elements from western rock and jazz too. 'I'm still very much on a journey exploring ancient Chinese music. That piece was an ideal opportunity to test the water, to see if I could express that sound using modern Western instruments.'

Black Sabbath (part of a ballet for Birmingham Royal Ballet, 2023) required collaboration with two other composers (Christopher Austin and Marko Nyberg) and three choreographers, to revisit tracks by the heavy metal band founded in Birmingham in 1968. The orchestration is sumptuous and yet still honours the soundworld of rock, orchestral instruments combining with electric guitar brilliantly well. 'I was in charge of providing music for the second act of the ballet. To begin with, we were going to choose a few numbers from Black Sabbath's hit tracks, but I was actually drawn to a more personal and reflective side of Sabbath, connected to the band's own stories – *Orchid* and *Planet Caravan*. One is more jazzy and the other is completely instrumental.' For her segment of the ballet, Rockey arranged four songs forming 30 minutes of music.

Her New Music piece, *Blood Moon*, has no text other than scat syllables, is written in 5/8 time and has a light-hearted appeal, yet without recourse to jazz techniques. Its swiftly-moving lines are comfortably singable and the directions give choirs the option of varying the scat syllables with a little improvisation if they wish. Does writing choral or vocal music without a conventional text bring challenge or liberation? 'It's definitely liberating. I don't come from a choral background, and my first choral commission was from the BBC Singers.' That's a great first commission – the BBC Singers – starting right at the top! 'Can you imagine how terrified I was? I almost had a panic attack and wondered if I should turn down the commission. But the addition of a sitar broadened the concept of the piece. For *Blood Moon*, I also chose to write a textless piece because I find my approach to choral music is more from a listener's perspective, not a singer's, and that means I might not respond to a text as well as other composers could.'

With so much already in her catalogue, what new creative endeavours are underway now that Rockey is freed from her academic responsibilities? 'I'm going to co-write with Alex Ho a new choral theatre piece. We are building on the collaborative work we did on *Bound/Unbound*, a music theatre dance piece that incorporates Chinese dance, an operatic soprano and an ensemble of six. For this new project, we're going to continue that creative journey and explore more interdisciplinary art.' The text is from a translation of 2000-year-old Chinese poetry by female writers. Co-commissioned by SANSARA and the Netherlands Chamber Choir, the music premiere will be in June at Britten Pears Arts, and the stage premiere follows in August at LSO St Luke's.

Now more than ever, there are so many avenues that a young composer can explore, it can be an overwhelming choice. What advice or encouragement might Rockey give to young composers who are beginning to develop their music? 'A couple of days ago, I was on a panel reading over 100 applications from composers; the ones that stood out for me were the composers who knew themselves more than their music. It is overwhelming to look at all of these paths and possibilities. Being an observer of your own self can lead you to develop your art so that it is unique to you. Self-knowledge in that sense seems to have been helpful to me.' ■


Blood Moon
for satb
Sun Keting
(2025)
Lethargic, lightly drifting
Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass
A
B
S.
A.
T.
B.
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This piece may be photocopied for performance until 31 May 2026,
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World premiere
The world premiere of *Blood Moon* by Rockey Sun Keting was given in July by The Choir of Trinity College Cambridge, directed by Steven Grahl.

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Inner light

Jessica Duchen and Roxanna Panufnik aim to bridge the gap between faiths this festive season. **George Hall** speaks to the librettist and composer about their alternative work for chorus and orchestra, celebrating the universal optimism of light in the darkest days.

Writer, critic and librettist Jessica Duchen first met composer Roxanna Panufnik some 30 years ago. Since then, they have produced two operas, as well various choral works and songs together. 'There was some sort of emotional synergy from the start,' Panufnik recalls. 'When I read poems or look at words I have an immediate reaction, hearing some kind of musical atmosphere in my head – and that happened with Jess.'

The usual pattern in their collaboration is for Panufnik to receive a commission, or to have an idea for a piece, and to ask Duchen to write the text. But in the case of their latest work, *Aurora: Faith in Harmony*, to be premiered at Symphony Hall in Birmingham on Sunday 7 December, the idea for the piece was Duchen's and came to her just before Christmas 2013.

'I went to hear John Adams's *El Niño* at the Festival Hall and loved it to bits. I thought how wonderful that there was an alternative to *Messiah*! And then it just hit me that I knew the perfect person to create a modern end-of-year multicultural multi-faith work that would update the whole idea of a Christmas piece; because if you're not a Christian, you are shut out for the duration of that season.

'I had to work out what could bind everything together,' she continues. 'I did some hunting around and I realised that many different faiths all over the world have a festival of light – the idea of light in darkness is pretty much universal.

'Independently, there was one thing that I was dying to do, and that was to see the Northern Lights: I thought that might bring in the secular community.' Here was something, Duchen believes, 'that creates that same sense of awe that you get from a religious faith, because when you look at the Northern Lights it is the most incredible sight: you just feel that you are seeing the heavens opening; so the *Aurora Borealis* movement ends the piece.'

▲ Long-term collaborators Roxanna Panufnik (left) and Jessica Duchen (right)

'If you're not a Christian, you are shut out for the duration of that season'

Given that *Aurora* is a multi-faith work, I asked composer and librettist if they could tell me about their own religious leanings. Panufnik has been a practising Catholic since her early twenties, 'but I'm also Jewish because my mother's family were Ashkenazi Jews. After the horrors of 9/11, when I was pregnant with my first child, I learnt that Christians, Jews and Muslims all believe in the same one God, which sent me on a bit of a quest. So, I have read a lot of religious texts and become fascinated about what they share and the beauty in all of them.'

The composer thinks that too much of what we see and hear in the media focuses on the negative aspects and conflicts between faiths. 'We rarely hear about their joyous, wonderful, beautiful aspects and the cultures that come with them.' Duchen was born into a Jewish family but not raised to be observant – 'so I identify as culturally Jewish, but, in other ways, not.'

What is most obvious about *Aurora*, and I suspect unique, is that it brings together a large number of faiths in one work: Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist and Jewish. Librettist and composer have both done a good deal of research in religious and musical matters in order to put these together in a convincing way, while respecting people of various faiths and their musical traditions.

'We have talked to some fantastic faith leaders,' Panufnik explains, 'and this piece is really our collaboration with them. All of them, without exception, have been hugely excited to be involved, as have the devotional musicians representing their respective faiths.

'We've been careful to ensure,' she insists, 'that we've sent words and programme notes for them to read at every stage to make sure they are happy with them. For instance, with Divali in its various forms – Hindu, Sikh or Jain – each will have different reasons for their celebrations. Although their devotional music is rooted in a sort of pan-Indian musical tradition, there are many different scales or rags that are used by each of these strands of faith; I wanted to make sure that I had got the right one.

'So it has been absolutely meticulous and fascinating,' she enthuses. 'I have loved every minute of it. It's been so fulfilling. When I had to deliver it to my publishers at the end of July, I felt as if I had sent one of my children off to university!'

What were the criteria in selecting the religious faiths? 'The issue,' Duchen tells me, 'was that the more you look, the more faiths

ANDREW FOX

you find. We started off thinking that we had to have the main Abrahamic faiths and Hinduism. Rox was also very keen to have the three different types of Divali in the one piece. I guess if there was a wild card it was probably Tibet – the one I've enjoyed the most. Buddhism is a large and fascinating faith.'

'What I didn't want to do was create a sort of manual of "This faith believes this". ' I wanted to evoke the feel of these festivals, their atmospheres, and the underlying drive behind them in the words.'

'The one qualifying thing', Panufnik explains, 'was that they needed to have a festival of light in the lead-up to Christmas.'

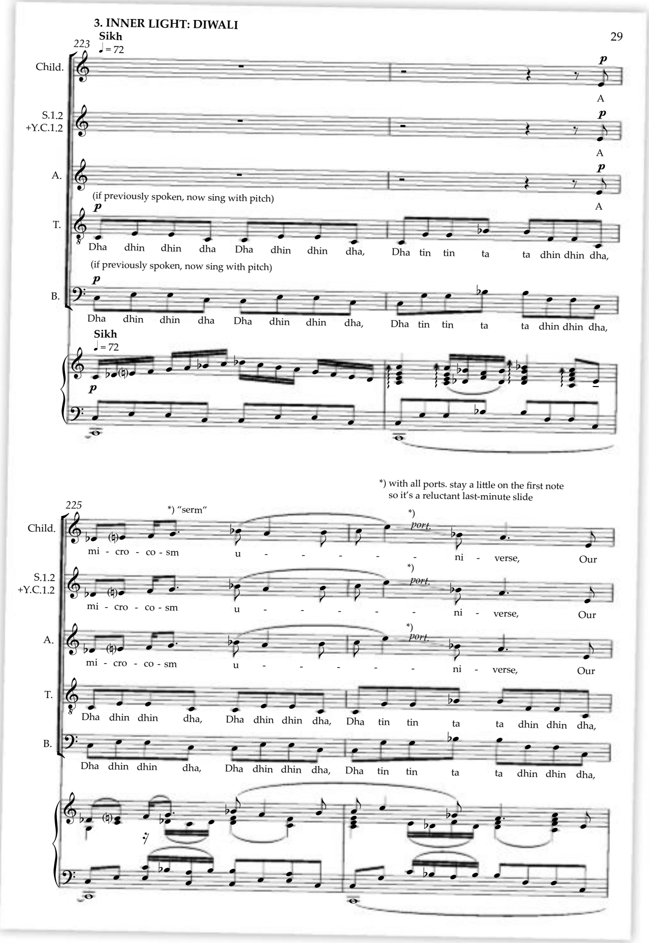
After the initial idea for the piece came to Duchen in 2013, there was a long period of gestation before work began seriously in September 2023. Over such a long period the commission passed more than once before settling with the CBSO. 'In 2020 and 2021, we did a lot of research and found our faith leaders. Initially we zoomed with them a lot, and so it was percolating for about three or four years by the time we began writing it.'

Birmingham seems an ideal place to host the premiere. 'I've worked with the CBSO quite a lot', Panufnik reminds me, 'and Birmingham is such a wonderful hub of many faiths. The CBSO are so embracing and want to welcome people in who might not normally come to a concert.'

'This is very much part of their remit – something for everybody, come and try some music! There will be 270 people singing with the orchestra and Michael Seal conducting. I think people who haven't been to a concert will be blown away – not necessarily by our piece, but by the experience. It's about bringing people together.'

The full version involves SSATB chorus, youth chorus and children's choir – but the last two groups are optional; any SSATB choir could sing *Aurora*. There is also an edition planned with chamber orchestra; and finally, there's a version for unison voices and piano.

I mention that in the current era, one perhaps senses more conflict between people of one faith and people of another. Were the creators keen to try to dissolve barriers in writing this piece, to bring commonality? 'Yes', says the composer. 'That's exactly what we want, to celebrate the things that we have in common and the things that we all celebrate. I think people are sick and tired of the negativity. They want to find connections and to see some good in our community'. ■


3. INNER LIGHT: DIWALI
29
223
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♩= 72
Child.
S.1.2 +Y.C.1.2
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T.
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p
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port.
mi - cro - co - sm u - ni - verse, Our

◄ **The score for Inner Light: Diwali from *Aurora: Faith in Harmony***

Aurora: Faith in Harmony *will be performed by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra on 7 December. cbso.co.uk*

▼ **The CBSO chorus**

RECORDINGS Q&A

CLIVE OSGOOD

Composer Clive Osgood talks to **Jonathan Whiting** about influences from Vivaldi to film scores, writing for voices first, and the craft behind singable tunes. In his Christmas album – recorded by Polyphony and Britten Sinfonia under Stephen Layton – he reflects on Latin vs English text, carol tradition, and shaping music for real performers

MARK COOTER

What influences your music?
I have many influences, which can be different from piece to piece. This can range from 'borrowing' a particular chord, to the structuring or feel of a movement or whole work from an existing piece. A good example of this might be my setting of Dixit Dominus, in which the overall key scheme and some chord sequences (and suspensions) were influenced by Vivaldi's setting of the same text.

What music do you listen to day to day?
My favourite composers are Bach and Mozart, but I listen to a wide range of music, from musicals and film music to classic pop and rock. There is also plenty of fantastic contemporary music I enjoy, including recent trends in choral music.

I particularly admire composers with a solid technique as well as a melodic gift.

Do you approach writing choral music differently from instrumental?
Any approach to composition should consider the capabilities of the performing forces, both the instruments and the players performing them. I therefore approach each composition project differently but do consider that good voice-leading for singers should apply to instrumental writing as well. I tend to write more with the performers in mind rather than the audience. Of course, audiences vary greatly, and you are unable to please everyone all the time.

Do you treat Latin vs English texts differently?
Not particularly, although it is obviously easier setting music in your own language. I do, however, enjoy the directness of Latin – with the lack of diphthongs, as well as its universality.

What makes Christmas music sound like Christmas?
I would say there is a strong sense of nostalgia and tradition associated with the story of Christmas, but also a variety of familiar themes, from lullabies to alleluias.

How important is melody?
For me, a strong and memorable melodic idea is the most important part of the piece. It is what I remember most about a piece of music. Of course, a good melody is often underpinned by its harmonic framework.

How involved do you get with recordings of your works?
I have been incredibly fortunate recently in having a number of very good recordings, and have been involved in some form, with the production of all of them, including performing the piano part in my Stabat Mater, and sitting with the producer on other occasions.

Are there particular moments/carols in Christmas Collection you would like listeners to look out for?
I am really pleased with the music on the album, and the performances by Polyphony are absolutely stunning. It is difficult to highlight particular moments to look out for, but the two opening carols, beginning with 'Hodie Christus natus est' offer an effective contrast. The solo soprano in the second track, 'Coventry Carol', soars beautifully towards the end of the piece. In the orchestral *Sinfonia Cantiones*, I was particularly pleased with my setting of 'Personent hodie', harmonised in a variety of ways with a solo counterpoint for the cor anglais. ■

Clive Osgood: Christmas Collection with the Britten Sinfonia, Polyphony and Stephen Layton is out now on Convivium Records

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Metzler Orgelbau AG

Tonal fusion

The Swiss firm Metzler Orgelbau last brought an organ to the UK in 1987.

Paul Hale investigates their recent work on the continent. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ORGAN BUILDER

In my late teens I bought the 18 long-playing records which comprised of the entire organ works of J S Bach (as then known) played by a youngish Lionel Rogg. Recorded on the large Metzler organ in Zurich's Grossmünster, the organ's tone was revelatory. Wonderfully full yet crystalline principal choruses, delicious flutes and an enormous range of mutations and colour reeds. Rogg used it to the full and in so doing brought Bach's music alive in a manner to which I had not yet been exposed. The recordings were made by Radio Zurich; listening again to them before writing this article, the playing and the organ still impress, the recording quality less so. However, entranced by these performances, when Rogg recorded *The Art of Fugue* in 1969 on the equally splendid Metzler in St Peter's, Geneva, I eagerly saved up my pocket money and bought the box set. A Brian Culverhouse recording for EMI Records, this was sonically fabulous, and the playing was equally fine. Again, I have just listened to it for the first

▲ The 1934 workshop in Dietikon has expanded to include a sawmill, casting room and metal shop

▼ The sawmill

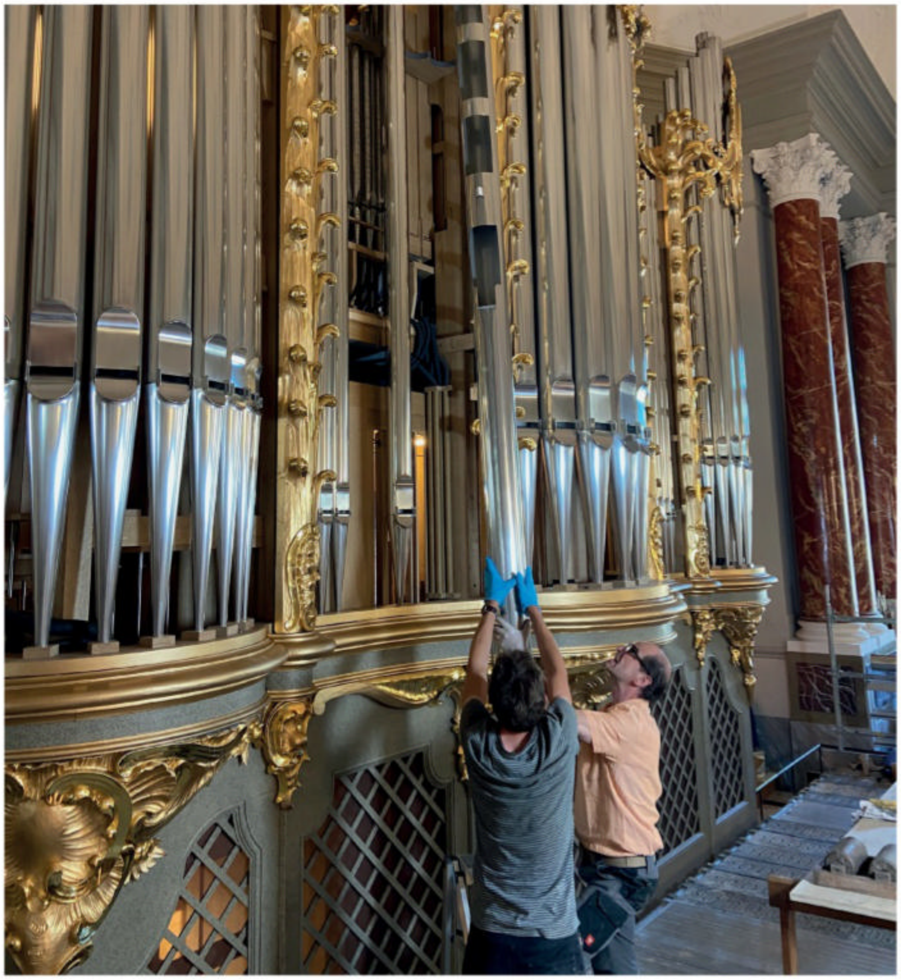
▲ Soldering a trumpet resonator; hammering pipe metal

time in decades, and would rush out and buy it again tomorrow if I needed to.

The 1965 Frobenius organ for the Queen's College, Oxford, sparked an interest in importing instruments by significant European firms: the 1971 II/22 Rudolph von Beckerath at Clare College, Cambridge, comes to mind, as does the 1973 III/26 Rieger in Clifton Roman Catholic Cathedral, their 1979 IV/43 in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, their IV/52 of 1987 for St Marylebone, London, along with the III/24 Klais of 1981 in Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge. Among the imports were two important organs from Metzler: in 1975 a magnificent III/42 instrument in the restored Bernard Smith case at Trinity College, Cambridge, followed in 1987 by a quite different – if equally uncompromising – organ (III/29) in the remade Smith case at the University Church in Oxford's High Street. Curiously and undeservedly, the Oxford organ has never been renowned outside that city, while the Cambridge instrument is an acknowledged and oft-recorded masterpiece.

Many European firms are winning contracts to build concert hall organs these days – a growth industry for them, as it was for British organ builders in the second half of the 19th century. Metzler recently installed a concert instrument in the Musiksaal des Stadtcasino, Basel. This, like many such projects, had a long period of gestation, beginning in 2013 when discussions began about replacing the 1971 organ, no longer considered adequate. The new organ was required to provide a richer, more sonorous sound for use with orchestra and in the organ's own symphonic repertoire. Space was tight, allowing for 56 ranks (66 speaking stops and 4,073 pipes), laid out in an ingenious fashion. As much colour and variety as possible was designed into the tonal scheme (including a *Winddynamische* 6-stop division), enabling the organ to sound larger and more flexible than its size would suggest. The console has an up-to-date electronic control system, with particular care being given to ensure its functions are intuitive.

An unusual requirement (warmly embraced by the Metzler team) was to make the materials and construction



MICHAEL KLAHRE

► The III/66 instrument for the Musiksaal des Stadtcasino in Basel represents 22,000 hours of work and sets a precedent for sustainable practices in organ building

Musiksaal des Stadtcasino, Basel, Switzerland

METZLER ORGELBAU, DIETIKON, SWITZERLAND (2020)

HAUPTWERK *(61 notes)*	
Principal	16
Octave	8
Gamba (slotted)	8
Viola d'Amore (conical)	8
Konzertflöte (open wood)	8
Gedackt	8
Octave	4
Spitzflöte	4
Superoctave	2
Cornet 1.8.12.15.17	V
Mixtur 15.19.22.26.29	V
Trompete	16
Trompete	8

ORCHESTRAL SWELL *(61 notes)*	
Geigen Diapason (slotted)	8
Dulciana (conical)	8
Quintaton	8
Claribel Flute (wood)	8
Principal (slotted)	4
Octave Viola (conical)	4
Concert Flute (open metal)	4
Twelfth	$2^{2}/_{3}$
Fifteenth	2
Tierce	$1^{3}/_{5}$
Septime	$1^{1}/_{7}$
Harmonics 19.b21.22.24.26	V
Orchestral Horn (slotted)	8
Clarinet	8
Tremulant	

RÉCIT ESPRESSIF *(61 notes)*	
Bourdon (wood/metal)	16
Viola de Gambe (slotted)	8
Gambe d'Echo (slotted)	8
Voix céleste (slotted)	8
Flûte Jacqueline (harm. treble)	8
Cor de Nuit (wood)	8
Viole	4
Flûte traversière (harm. treble)	4
Octavin (harm. treble)	2
Carillon 17.22	II-III
Progression 15.19	II-VI
Basson Martin	16
Trompette harmonique	8
Basson-Hautbois	8
Voix humaine	8
Clairon harmonique	4
Tremulant	

TUBA *(61 notes)*	
Tuba (250mm wind)	8

WINDDYNAMISCHE ORGEL *(F-f2)*	
(wind pressure variable by the player)	
Flauto	8
Principal	4
Quintade	$2^{2}/_{3}$
Terzade	$1^{3}/_{5}$
Windharfe	4

PEDAL *(32 notes)*	
Grand Bourdon (ext. Subbass)	32
Flûte (open wood)	16
Principalbass (from HW)	16
Subbass (wood)	16
Flûte (ext. 16ft)	8
Flûte (metal)	4
Contrebasson	32
Bombarde	16
Fagott (from HW)	16
Trompete	8
Klarine	4

ORCHESTERPEDAL *(32 notes)*	
Zartbass (from Récit)	16
Open Diapason (from Or Sw)	8
Violoncelle (from Récit)	8
Claribel Flute (from Or Sw)	8
Basson Martin (from Récit)	16
Horn (from Or Sw)	8

techniques of the new instrument as sustainable as possible. All the tin content of the pipes comes from conflict-free regions, sourced from certified suppliers. All the timber is from local, renewable sources. The firm aimed 'to set a precedent for sustainable practices in organ building'. 22,000 hours of work went into this organ, which is expected to enhance the cultural landscape of Basel, symbolising, as it does, the city's tangible commitment to art, music and sustainability.

The unusual and richly eclectic stop list is worthy of examination, being Metzler's version of an eclectic tonal design appropriate for contemporary concert use.

An entirely different instrument was recently completed (in two stages, the first in 2017) for the Leipzig University Church of St Paul. Andreas Metzler considers it to be 'our interpretation of the late Gothic conception of a large instrument'. To describe this organ, I give brief extracts from the company's own explanation (translated for us by John Sayer and edited by the current writer):

▲ **At the Leipzig University Church of St Paul, a new II/20 swallow's nest organ reinterprets a documented instrument of 1528**

The new swallow's nest organ owes its creation not least to the musician and organologist Michael Praetorius (1571–1621), who in 1619 described an organ from around 1528 in the Paulinerkirche in his *Syntagma Musica II*. Our new organ is not a slavish copy of the 1528 organ, but a reinterpretation of this type of instrument. The guiding principals were these:

- Both manuals comprise well-equipped principal choruses, drawing as individual stops.

▷

Leipzig University Church of St Paul

SWALLOW'S NEST ORGAN – METZLER ORGELBAU, DIETIKON, SWITZERLAND (2017/20XX)

I. UNTERWERK *(C,D,E,F,G,A – c3)*

Grobgedackt	8
Principal (partly in front)	4
Mittel Gedackt	4
Kleine Octävelein	1
Zimbeln 26.29	II
Gross, blechen Kälber Regall	8

II. OBERWERK *(C,D,E,F,G,A – c3)*

Groß-Principal (partly in front)	16
Principal	8
Rohrflöte	8
Octava	4
Quinta	3
Superoctava	2
Rauschpfeif-Zimbelen 19.22	II
Mixtur 8.12.15.19.22.26	VI-XII

II. REGALWERK *(C,D,E,F,G,A – c3)*

Messing Regall (brass)	8

PEDALWERK *(C,D,E,F,G,A – d1)*

Groß-Principal (from OW)	16
Subbass (wood)	16
Principal (from OW)	8
Posaunen	16
Cornet	2

I-II, I-Ped, II-Ped
Zimbelstern OW, Zimbelstern UW,
Tambour, Vogelsang, Tremulant
Pitch: a1=466Hz at 23ºC
Temperament: Mitteltönig

- The Hauptwerk Mixtur is based on 4ft without repeats [i.e. no ranks 'breaking back'] and thus remains a relic of the old Blockwerk organ.
- In addition to the principal stops, there are several stopped flutes and fractional-length reed stops.
- Tonal developments that were already known at the beginning of the 16th century are not yet present, such as narrow and wide mutations, narrow-scaled registers (open and stopped), open and conical flutes, full-length reeds.

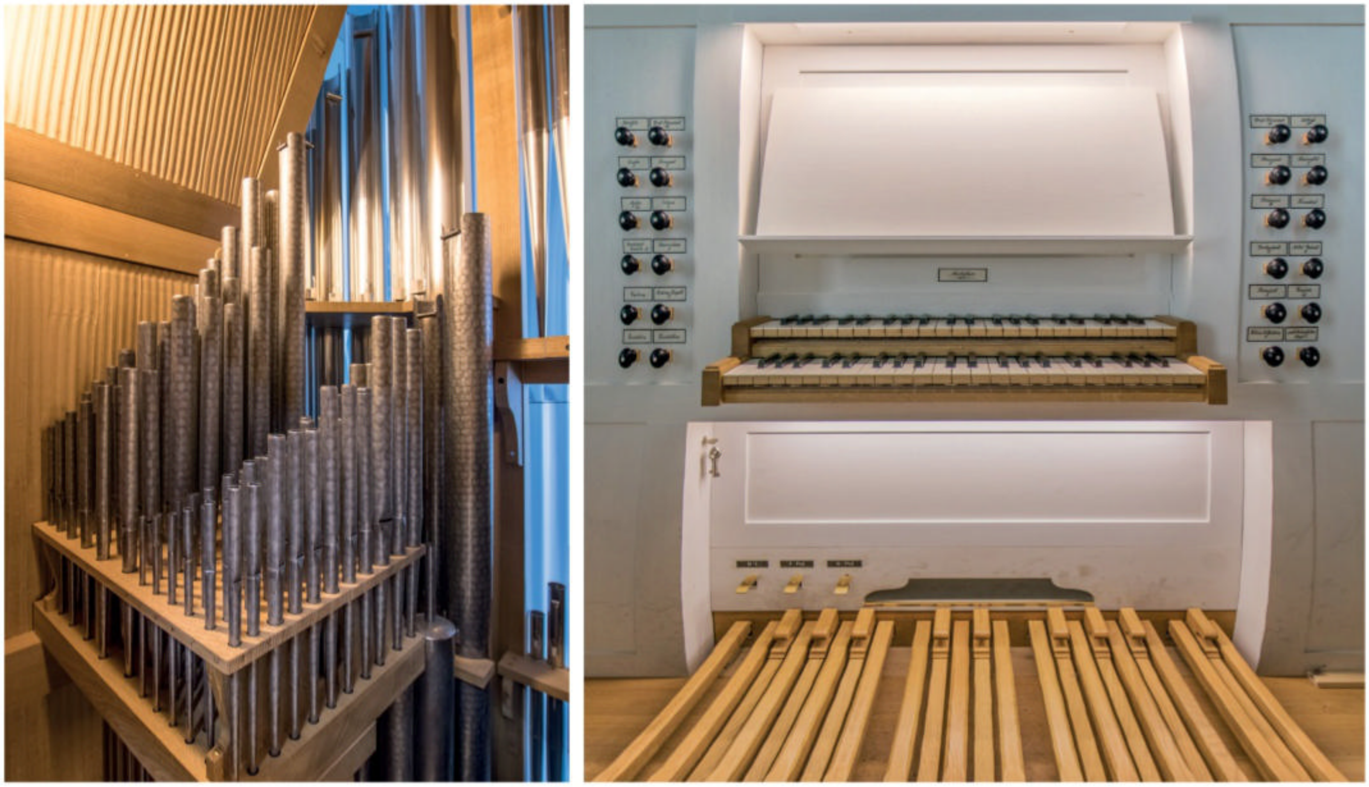
These characteristics give the instrument a clear late Gothic profile and distinguish it from the magnificent historic organs of the 17th century.

For the voicing of the new swallow's nest organ, we therefore chose a characterful, lively, and powerful style, which, in combination with the meantone tuning, gives the organ an archaic character. This lends itself to the music of the 15th and 16th centuries, in particular, a previously unimagined authenticity that confronts our modern listening habits with a completely new sound-world.

There is just space to mention the replacement Choir organ currently being made for Linkøping Kathedrale, Sweden, the firm's Opus 673. This Lutheran cathedral is one of the largest Gothic cathedrals in Scandinavia, dating from the 12th and 13th centuries. Like all such vast buildings, it needs an organ at either end. The new Choir organ, a 3-manual of 30 speaking stops, replaces a small neoclassical instrument from an earlier date.

Andreas Metzler writes: 'It represents our most frequent tonal conception, which is a fusion of different sources and allows a wide spectrum of literature.' The stop list of this mechanical action organ, with two enclosed

▼ **Pipes of the Oberwerk Mixture VI-XII; the key desk with short-octaves in the bass**



▶

► Andreas and Mathias Metzler (the fourth generation) now direct the company

divisions, is a rich German/French affair, with 15 stops of 16 & 8ft pitch on the manuals, underpinning three complete principal choruses and allowing for many voices with no single stop type being duplicated.

To this writer it looks like the perfect 'Choir' organ, with all the colours needed for the accompaniment of choral music of many periods, plus sufficient additional stops to make the playing of organ literature a real joy. If this is indeed Metzler's 'most frequent tonal conception' it promises as rich a future for the firm as its illustrious past. ■

Paul Hale has written extensively about organs while also working as a cathedral organist, teacher and organ consultant

135 years of history

Jakob Metzler was born in 1855 in Schwarzenberg/Vorarlberg (Austria). After training as a cabinet-maker, Jakob was apprenticed in 1879 to the organ-building and wood-working firm of Anton Behmann in Schwarzach, also learning from the highly regarded organ-building firm of Mauracher in Linz. On completion of his training in 1885, he joined Gebrüder Klingler in Rohrschach, who worked in the Graubünden (the Grisons Canton in Switzerland).

After only five years, in 1890 Metzler (aged 35) set up his own business in the same Canton (at Jenaz in Prättigau). Though he soon won a contract for the church at Furna, he came to feel that a workshop near the regional centre of Chur would be more advantageous and therefore moved in 1900 to Felsberg. Despite a lack of funding at this time for cultural desirables such as organs, his conscientious work won the trust of the local communities.

Rather ahead of his time, Metzler was in tune with the Arts & Crafts Movement, which – called Werkbund – was founded in Munich in 1907 and had made its way to Switzerland by 1913. He avoided the use of machines, believing in the hand-crafted work at which he was adept. As well as new commissions, his main income came from the repair and rebuilding of old, often seriously run-down organs. Some of these have been preserved, among them instruments at Luzein, Maienfeld, Ramosch/Remüs, Ardez and Susch/Süs.

Unsurprisingly, Jakob had little time for the various types of pneumatic action as developed by his competitors, though this cost him contracts which he could ill afford to lose, so the firm did eventually fit pneumatic Kegellade (cone) chests when they could not persuade a client to invest in or restore a mechanical action. Before his death, in 1925, Metzler had already handed the firm over to his two sons, Oscar and Albert, renaming the firm Metzler & Söhne in 1924. It became Metzler & Cie in 1927 and a branch was opened in Dietikon, near Zurich, in 1931.

Oscar had trained as a teacher, organist and conductor before joining the family firm. In 1933 he moved with his family to Dietikon, which proved a good base for the development of the firm. After using rented premises, in 1934 he laid the foundation stone of new workshops at 154 Zürcherstrasse. In 1949 the company name changed back to Metzler & Söhne. Four years later, a machine room, metal shop and casting room were built and the Felsberg workshop closed (though a subsidiary workshop there was reopened from 1968 to 1971). In 1965 a pipe-making department was set up, allowing Metzler to manufacture metal pipes in-house, an important requirement for voicing. A final name change, to Metzler Orgelbau AG occurred in 1975, on the retirement of Oscar Metzler (senior).

Following the advent of the *Orgelbewegung* in the mid-1920s, Metzler had returned to slider chests during the 1930s and from 1937 the firm was again building organs with mechanical action. In a move which would have made his father proud, Oscar took the decision to limit the workshop to this type of action. This was a brave step, as reliable electro-pneumatic actions were proving popular at the same time. With considerable design ability he was able to perfect a light and precise playing action, using modern components and techniques. Another modern component was the Schwimmer wind regulator, which saved a great deal of room within the organ and offered a particularly stable wind supply.

With Andreas and Mathias Metzler (the fourth generation) now directing the company, developments over recent decades have been a return to historic case design and restoration, while embracing the reawakening of interest in Romantic organ music.

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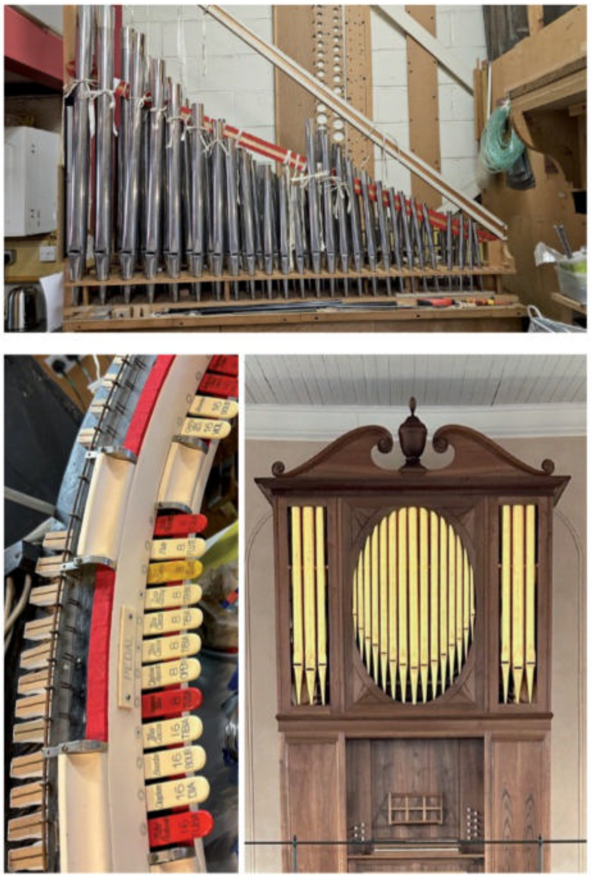

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We undertake yearly maintenance on the iconic Wurlitzer organ of the Tower Ballroom Blackpool. 2025 saw the re-leathering of the console stop action secondary motors.

We completed the restoration and relocation of the John Nicholson organ of All Saints church, Middleton Stoney. The organ was moved from within an archway, to the back of the church, to support church reordering and better sound projection. We created new casework to match the original to finish the organ off.

We are currently finishing an extensive historically-informed rebuild and restoration of the 1886 Nicholson and Lord organ of Holy Trinity Church, Minchinhampton. We are building a once-prepared-for Choir division in the style of the original builder, and expanding the original pedal organ.

This year we have put considerable investment into some new, larger woodworking machinery, so that we can work more efficiently. We have also expanded our team with three new members of staff, bringing our numbers to eight people on the workshop floor. This has given us a greater diversity of skills, and increased our capacity.

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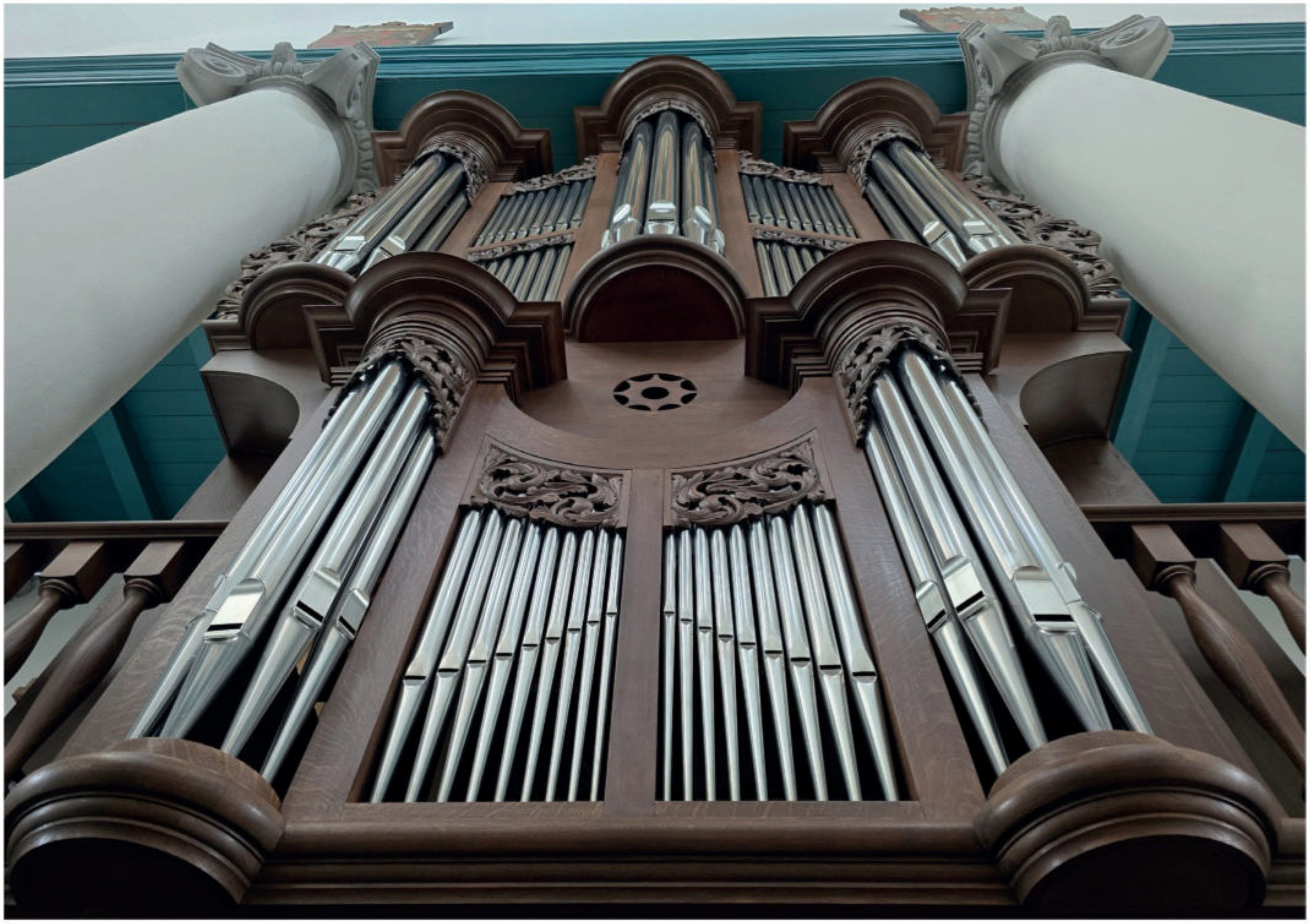


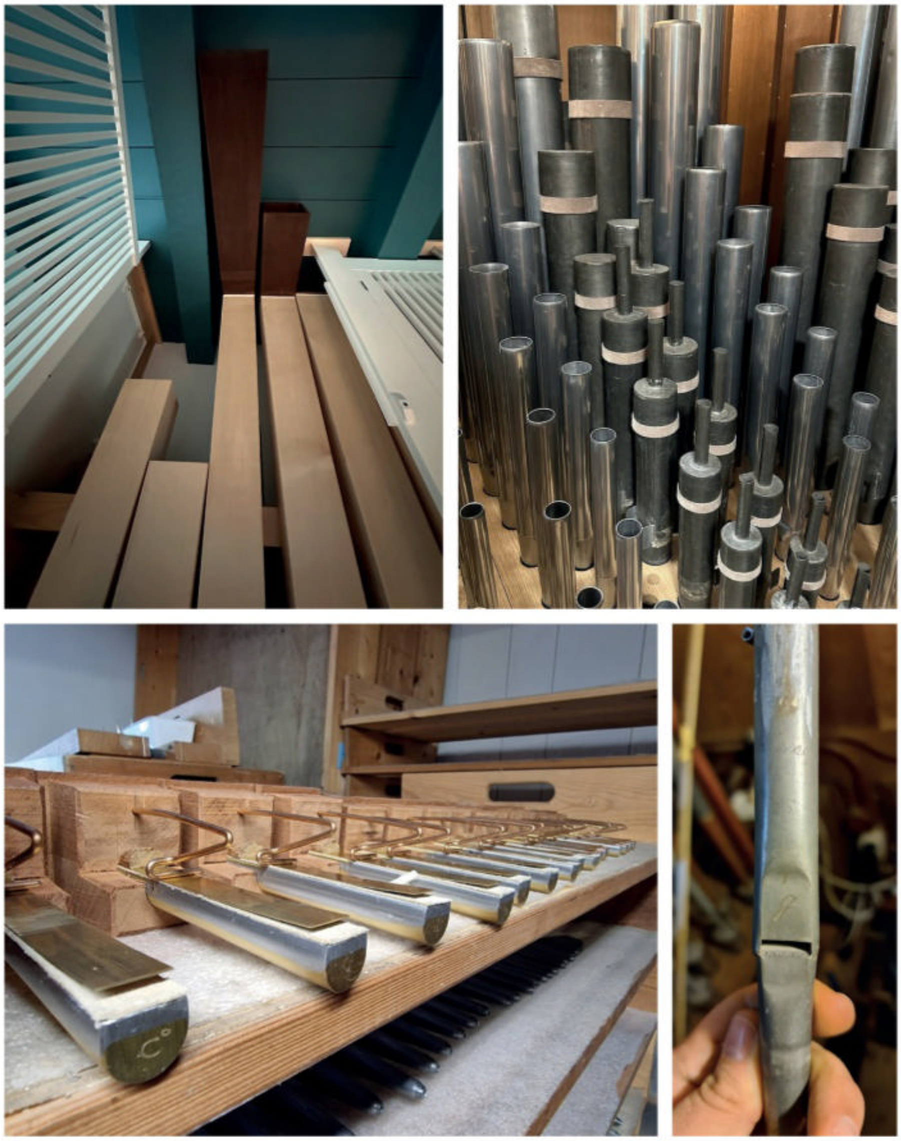
SANDER BOOIJ

▲ **The slim towers and carved pipeshades recall Vollebregt, while the rosette between the manual divisions is derived from the organ installed in Renswoude in 1866**

An auspicious arrival

The 17th-century Koepelkerk in Renswoude, central Netherlands, provides the backdrop to Sander Booij's first organ since taking charge of the venerable workshop of Mense Ruiter & Van Rossum. **Chris Bragg** went to investigate

Last year [*C&O* Spring 2024, pp 25-28] I profiled the work of the young Dutch organ builder Sander Booij, then recently appointed Director of the long-established Ten Post (Groningen) workshop of Mense Ruiter. Booij's ear-popping tonal transformation of the late 1970s Ruiter orgel at Kollumerzwaag whetted the appetite for a new organ conceived entirely from his own convictions. Two years later that new organ is a fact. The Koepelkerk in Renswoude was designed by the greatest architect of the Dutch Golden Age, Jacob van Campen, whose works include the Royal Palace in Amsterdam, and the famed organ case provided for Van Hagerbeer's organ at Alkmaar in 1645. The church takes the form of a Greek Cross with the dome (*koepel*) sealed by a flat, painted wooden ceiling. As a consequence, it has a small footprint, though a relatively large cubic volume. Liturgically the church is confessional, belonging to the *Gereformeerde Bond* movement within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), and the role of the organ therefore revolves primarily around the accompaniment of strong congregational (psalm) singing. While, as elsewhere, more liberal Protestant churches in the Netherlands are closing at a disturbing rate, *Bondskerken* remain busy, and in Renswoude donations for the new organ



SANDER BOOIJ

▲ **Clockwise from top left: pallets and springs of the new pedal chest; new pipes of the Cornet II/III; an old pipe of the 3ft Quint; Bazuin 16 pipes (leathered shallots in North German style)**

were forthcoming from local businesses, villagers and, in particular, from the widow of a former Minister.

Not unusually, the story of the new organ's predecessors had been characterised both by misstep and innate Dutch resourcefulness. In 1866, the church installed an anonymous second-hand instrument, with obvious traits from the Southern Netherlands, on a small gallery opposite the main entrance to the church and the pulpit. This remained in service until 1937 when Utrecht organ builder De Koff subsumed pipework (altered to accommodate a higher pressure), soundboard and elements of the console into a new single-manual organ, remarkably with mechanical action, and installed behind a caseless zinc façade opposite its predecessor, above the pulpit. The resulting vista having worn thin with the church's decision-makers, in 1977 the organ was placed behind a more traditional second-hand façade from Oud-Loosdrecht, made by the early 20th-century builder Spiering.

> 'The organ is brilliantly judged'

That Booij should have his first opportunity to fully flex his creative muscle in Renswoude might, with hindsight, seem like destiny. As a child he had visited regularly, his father singing during events as a member of a visiting choir. Afterwards, while the adults drank coffee, young Sander would explore the organ. 'Even then I realised that it wasn't a nice organ, but it did have some nice stops.' Organ advisor Peter van Dijk, in his 2009 report when better solutions were first sought, agreed: 'The organ should not be considered for – now essential – restoration, but the very valuable 18th- and 19th-century pipework should be restored to its former glory.' Later, while working for Adema, Booij had become responsible for maintaining the organ, and the request to propose its successor landed on his desk just weeks after his arrival at Mense Ruiter.

On inspection, it transpired that the 19th-century pipework in the organ was most likely by Johannes Vollebregt (1793-1872), based in Catholic North-Brabant where he absorbed elements of the local style while maintaining his roots as a former employee of the traditional *Hollandse* builders Bätz, Lohman and Naber. Numerous organs by Vollebregt survive including the 1846 organ now in Sleen, restored in two phases by Mense Ruiter in the early 1990s. It further transpired that Vollebregt had made use of pipework from as early as the mid-17th century, probably from the Liège area (in the 8ft and 4ft flutes of the Onderpositief, later generations' nicking now removed as far as possible) as well as part of an 18th-century 4ft Octaaf and a Quint with an unusually narrow bass and treble and a far wider middle.

The organ is constructed on a new gallery, opposite its immediate predecessor and approximately where the 1866 organ stood. It is executed as a *balustradeorgel*, the organ sitting within the balustrade with the console at the side, allowing an ideal viewing position of the entire church. The Positief is located directly underneath the Hoofdwerk, with the pedal behind and a passageway for access to the console and to the Onderpositief soundboard between. A pair of wedge bellows is located below the pedal; an absence of space preventing the option of hand-blowing. The new case references that which clothed the previous organ prior to De Koff's 1937 intervention, as documented in photographs, including the rosette between the manual divisions. The slim towers and carved pipeshades ▸

SANDER BOOIJ

recall Vollebregt as, at the console, do the form of the stop knobs and key cheeks.

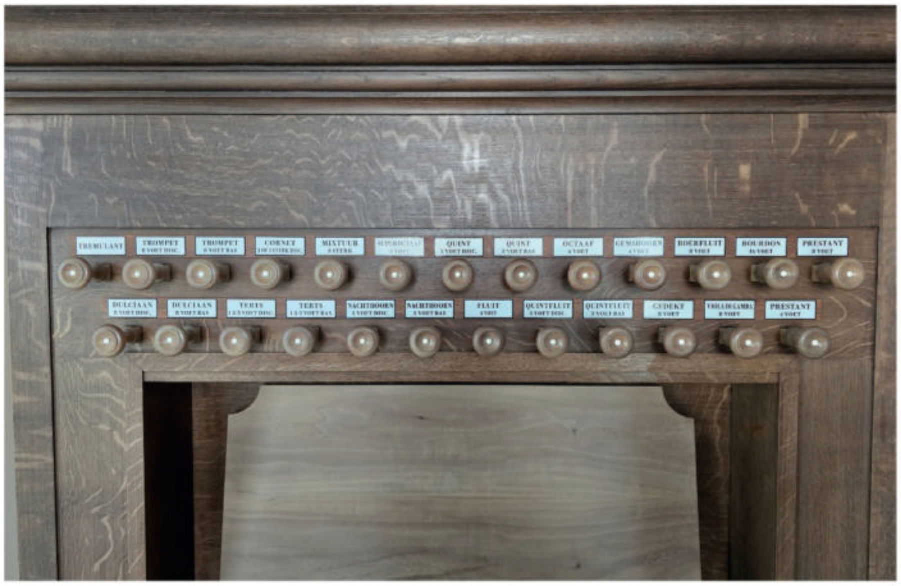
The initial drawings of the new case, and technical layout, were developed in conjunction with Booij's predecessor Dolf Tamminga. As Booij gradually assumed control of the business, a similar dynamic was playing itself out further south in the Wijk en Aalburg workshop of Hans van Rossum, whose retirement had seen Gerrit de Jong assume leadership. As Tamminga bowed out in Ten Post and with de Jong requiring support in tonal matters in Wijk en Aalburg, a co-operation began which led to a formal fusion of the Ruiter and Van Rossum businesses. Remarkably, the Renswoude organ bears witness to contributions from both retiring directors and their successors. During the course of the project, Booij initiated some changes to the initial tonal plan proposed by advisor Van Dijk: the addition of wide-scale 16ft and 4ft stops to the Hoofdwerk, and the deployment of an exceptionally malleable full-length pedal reed (significantly mitred, with leathered shallots) in place of the originally intended Fagot. The pedal's 16ft flue meanwhile is re-purposed from De Koff's 1937 instrument but with the pipewalls planed rather thinner for better resonance, while the metal Prestant is speechy and cello-like. Gerrit de Jong's knowledge of historic winding systems was also critical for the relationship between sound, touch and the natural sense of breathing critical to any organ with Classical roots, and especially desirable in the accompaniment of voices. Both from a listening and playing perspective the sense of conceptual unity is strikingly discernible and the touch highly nuanced.

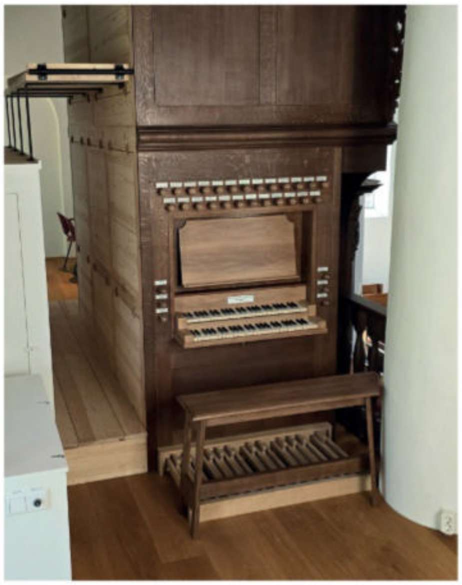
While the church sought an organ which encouraged rather than dominated and in which the surviving southern pipework provided the stylistic cue, the identification of Vollebregt focussed the thinking. Vollebregt's scalings, noted from a variety of organs, provided the basis for the new pipework but some clever adaptations have been applied to certain elements. The Trompet, for example, has North German shallots in the bass, sonorous rather than shouty in the context of the organ's proximity to the opposite wall, the transition imperceptible. The three-rank Cornet of the Hoofdwerk, meanwhile, can be used as a two-rank Sesquialtera by means of a half-draw; the scaling adapted to accommodate, the wider-scaled cornet being available *décomposée* on the Onderpositief.

From the outset, Booij's lively voicing style, discussed in my previous article, is obvious; the

▲ Sander Booij and Gerrit de Jong

▼ The console, located on the side of the main case, references Vollebregt in its details




SANDER BOOIJ

CHRIS BRAGG

▲ **The painted wooden ceiling in the dome absorbs much sound energy from the room**

Koepelkerk, Renswoude, Netherlands

MENSE RUITER & VAN ROSSUM ORGELMAKERS (2025)

MANUAAL *(upper manual, C-f3, 54 notes)*

Bourdon	16	(new, C-b, wood, c1-f3 stopped metal)
Prestant	8	(new, partly in façade)
Roerfluit	8	(C-B wood, c-f3 metal with chimneys)
Octaaf	4	(partly 18th-century, partly Vollebregt, 1 pipe De Koff, rest new)
Gemshoorn	4	(new, very wide in the bass)
Quint	3	(divided, partly 18th-century in flute scale, partly Vollebregt in principal scale, remainder new)
Super Octaaf	2	(Vollebregt with the exception of four new pipes)
Mixtuur	III	(new, scaling based on Super Octaaf)
Cornet	II/III	(2ft rank on half-draw, new, 1 semitone wider than Super Octaaf)
Trompet	8	(new, divided, C-f sharp closed, leathered shallots, remainder open shallots, scaling and construction details based on Vollebregt organ, Breugel)

ONDERPOSITIEF *(lower manual, C-f3, 54 notes)*

Gedekt	8	(C De Koff, remainder partly Vollebregt, partly 17th-century with high lead content)
Viol di Gamba	8	(C-B from Gedekt, remainder Vollebregt)
Prestant	4	(new, partly in façade, scaling between Viol di Gamba and Manuaal Prestant 8)
Fluit	4	(one pipe by De Koff, remainder partly Vollebregt, partly 17th-century with high lead content)
Quintfluit	3	(divided, new)
Nachthoorn	2	(divided, new)
Terts	$1^3/_5$	(new)
Dulciaan	8	(divided, C-F closed shallots, remainder open, scaling and construction, based on Vollebregt organ, Sint Anthonis)

PEDAAL *(C-d1, 27 notes)*

Subbas	16	(De Koff, wood, pipewalls planed thinner and cut-ups raised)
Octaaf Bas	8	(six pipes 1977 with new feet and languids, remainder new)
Bazuin	16	($^1/_4$ sawn Romanian spruce, scale of 8ft C sharp identical to 8ft C of Manuaal Trompet, shallots 1 semitone wider than Trompet, lowest six notes mitred)

Tremulant to whole organ
Onderpositief to Manuaal, Manuaal to Pedaal, Onderpositief to Pedaal
Temperament: Young II, Pitch: a1=440, Wind pressure: 68mm
Advisor: Peter van Dijk

8ft Prestant (relatively wide, Vollebregt scale but without his nicking), overtone-rich with the consonant very evident. The reeds have that characteristic, common to many outstanding organs, of making the sound predominantly richer and more intense, rather than obviously louder. The cohesion of the reeds, chorus (bright and lively despite the quint Mixtuur having just three ranks) and cornet is thrilling. The manual divisions dovetail entirely naturally, especially evident when the cornets, or the 8ft Prestant/4ft Prestant, played an octave lower, are heard in dialogue. The flutes – varied, conversational, warmly charming – 'ping' vociferously in the treble, the 3ft Quint doing its double duty. Nevertheless, the Onderpositief is more obviously Mendelssohnian than its senior partner, Vollebregt's Viol di Gamba pointing the way to an entirely different facet of the organ than the 18th-century sensibilities to which player and listener are instinctively drawn. Registering horizontally, initially by combining the 8fts, prompts the organ to bloom generously, presenting an altogether more 19th-century face, and indeed it's easy to forget, until at least the 4ft Praestants are added, that no enclosure is present. A 'Romantic' tutti – Cornet, reeds, no mixture – is hair-raising in the best possible way. The mildly unequal tuning provides some relaxation just where one wants it without eliminating any keys altogether: 'With so many tierces, equal temperament would have been a bit harsh,' notes Booij.

For an organ of just 21 stops this is quite the chameleon then, but one whose most striking quality is the virtuosic interplay of highly characterised and varied individual stops with an entirely convincing cohesion in the various ensembles. Following some pre-voicing by Hans van Rossum, Booij spent nearly four months voicing on-site, and it shows. In a difficult room with the dome's wooden ceiling providing even less reflection than anticipated, it's brilliantly judged; rich, never too loud, conceptually enigmatic and deeply absorbing for the player. Whether providing the core heft to support the fervour of a *Bondskerk* congregation in full flight, or in the chamber-music textures of an 18th-century trio or partita, or in the dark hues of the 19th-century German repertoire, the organ evinces a dizzying sense of artistic conviction. An 'opus one' both in the sense of the first instrument conceived from the outset by Sander Booij, and the first to be completed by the newly fused workshops of Ruiter and Van Rossum, it is as accomplished a debut as one could hope to encounter, and an extraordinary achievement. ■

Watch a documentary from GoArt about this project here: shorturl.at/vuWMy

Chris Bragg studied organ at the former RSAMD and the Conservatories of Amsterdam and Utrecht. He is head of programming at the University of St Andrews Music Centre, artistic director of St Andrews Organ Week, and a freelance organist, teacher, writer and translator

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NATIONAL CHILDREN'S CHORUS

FRANCES MARSHALL

NICHOLAS WEARNE

CHOIR & ORGAN NEXT ISSUE

SPRING 2026

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We reveal the 2026 *Choir & Organ* New Music partners, as well as the four composers commissioned to write a work for choir or organ

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New organs by these renowned builders, interviews with performers and a series on organ repertoire

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IN THE STUDIO

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF CHORAL AND ORGAN RECORDINGS

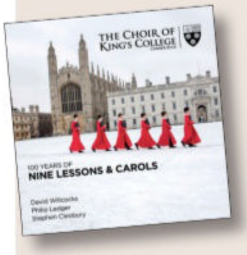
LIA VITTONE

▲ St Martin's Voices have released a Christmas album of music by contemporary composers on Resonus

Upcoming releases

On the 16 January 2026 Alexander Ffinch will release *Expectations* on Divine Art, a musical journey of the seasons featuring original works and arrangements, recorded on the organ at Cheltenham College. St Martin's Voices have recently released *A babe is born: Music for Christmas* on Resonus Classics featuring a range of choral works from contemporary composers such as Cecilia McDowall, Gabriel Jackson, Kerensa Briggs and Emily Hazrati. On 16 January, Robert Costin is releasing *J S Bach: The Art of Fugue* on First Hand Records, recorded on the Metzler organ of Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge.

Recording retrospective



40 years ago... Judith Weir's carol 'Illuminare Jerusalem' was premiered and recorded. The carol was commissioned in 1985 by Sir Stephen Cleobury while he was Director of Music at King's College Cambridge. He decided to commission a new carol to be performed each year at the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve. Judith Weir was the third composer to be commissioned, and she chose a 16th-century Scottish poem as her text. The music is for choir and organ but only the organ's pedals are employed, playing the deep bass notes of the instrument to accompany the Latin refrain.

STUDIO NEWS

Kantos Choir are recording *The Witch Trials*, an immersive reflection on the Lancashire Witch Trials of 1612. They are recording in Manchester mid-November and the recording will be released on Delphian Records in October 2026.

The **Nonsuch Singers** have recorded an album of the choral music of Edmund Jolliffe, which will be released by Convivium Records in 2026.

The King's Singers will be recording their upcoming Christmas album in January 2026.

Organist **Joseph Nolan** will be recording an album of Alkan's organ music in Berlin in January for release on Signum.

Tenebrae, who celebrate their 25th anniversary in 2026, are recording Tallis's *Spem in alium* alongside other works in November.

WILL COATES GIBSON

▲ Kantos Choir will be recording *The Witch Trials* in November

ORGAN CDS

The Eule Organ – Magdalen College, Oxford

Alexander Pott, Eule organ (2023), Magdalen College, Oxford

Convivium Records CR109 (two CDs)

★★★★

Alexander Pott was, until earlier this year, assistant organist at Magdalen College, Oxford and witnessed the birth of the new Eule organ first-hand.

Its debut recording reveals an instrument with a dark and colourful personality, in which outstanding tonal finishing all but overcomes a somewhat overwrought concept (a mixture of actions, slightly odd borrowings and a case which overhangs the gallery on the antechapel side in a none-too-elegant manner).

Potts's programme is really clever, juxtaposing mid-to-late Romantic German and English music. The inclusion of Eric Fenby's transcription of Delius 'On the Hearing the First Cuckoo' between excerpts from Karg-Elert's 'Lake of Constance' and Whitlock's Four Extemporis-ations is particularly inspired. The use of Potts' transcription of Warlock's Folk-Song Preludes is a creative and idiomatic way to show off solo colours and the final single-movement sonata by early 20th-century Covent Garden singer Frederick Austin, dedicated to Whitlock, is an interesting and enjoyable discovery. The booklet and inlay feature Eule's technical drawings of the organ and the presentation in general is excellent. Warmly recommended.

CHRIS BRAGG

Te Deum – Organ Works by Egil Hovland (1924-2013)

Anders Eidsten Dahl, Carsten Lund organ (1998), Bragernes Kirke, Drammen (Norway)

LAWO LWC1400

★★★

The prolific Norwegian composer Egil Hovland is perhaps best known in the UK for his Toccata on 'Nun Danket alle Gott'. However, his organ works were many, though largely similarly based on the hymnody of the Lutheran Church of his homeland. And that hymnody was seemingly diverse, encompassing among the works represented on this disc alone, Lutheran chorales, a French Noël as well as melodies also familiar to Anglican congregations. The programme presented here admirably by Anders Eidsten Dahl consists, therefore, almost entirely of miniatures, whether in the form of partita movements or chorale preludes. A rugged neo-classicism is all but ubiquitous, sometimes in a more 'neo-friendly' (Hovland's term) style, sometimes reflecting more obviously his studies in America with Copland and in Italy with Dallapiccola. Bachian references and contrapuntal techniques abound and are skilfully deployed; as music to colour the liturgy Hovland's is a rich resource. Nordic music guru Andrew Mellor's liner notes are splendid but it's a shame no information about the organ is included (I had to Google) and the tuning isn't always what it might have been.

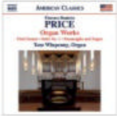
CHRIS BRAGG

Florence Beatrice Price: Organ Works

Tom Winpenny, Ernest Martin Skinner, Op 823 (1930), Saalkirche Ingelheim, Germany

Naxos 8559956

★★★★★



There has been a real resurgence of interest in Florence Price's music and the organ music has certainly been unjustly neglected, largely really because this pre-war style fell out of favour soon after Price's death. The First Organ Sonata of 1927 makes a bold impression with the virtuosic writing demonstrating her assured command of the instrument. There are echoes of Guilmant (especially in the third movement) or Rheinberger in the inventive *Passacaglia & Fugue*. The later pieces from the 1940s are deeply rooted in African American spirituals and clearly draw on Price's experience accompanying silent movies in the 1930s. Winpenny delivers exquisitely crafted performances particularly revelling in the playful nature of pieces like the charming Caprice (recorded for the first time) or the Suite for Organ. The Skinner organ, transplanted from New Jersey to Germany by Klais in 2013, is perfect for this recording with so many delicious orchestral colours to enjoy.

RUPERT GOUGH

Michael Finnissy: Organ Works

Forrest Eimold, JW Walker Organ (1969) Blackburn Cathedral, UK; The Charles B Fisk & Peter J Gomes Memorial Organ, C B Fisk, Opus 139 (2012) & Skinner Organ Company, Opus 793 (1929), Harvard Memorial Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

Divine Art MEX 77208 (Two CDs)

★★★★

MICHAEL FINNISSY

The music of British composer Michael Finnissy is often described as transcending conventional boundaries. The organ music is certainly rich in both intellectual depth and imagination and ahead of Finnissy's 80th birthday next year the brilliant young organist Forrest Eimold has produced an impressive double CD of these complex works. The music presented spans over six decades and charts the evolution of a composer constantly challenging himself to think beyond compositional norms. I found the most captivating performances the ones recorded in Blackburn Cathedral (three of the symphonies together with a newly composed work titled *Blackburn*). In that generous acoustic Eimold weaves an intricate tapestry of sound and colour which works so well with this music – moving seamlessly from luminous to foreboding – often disturbing and intriguing in equal measure.

RUPERT GOUGH

Peter Garland: Plain Songs 'Love Comes Quietly': (after Robert Creeley)

Carson Cooman, Peter J Gomes and Charles B Fisk Memorial Organ, Harvard University, USA

Cold Blue Music CB0070

★★★★

peter garland

Garland was inspired to write 'intimate and mostly quiet' music by the stark simplicity of poet Robert Creeley's language. In seven movements, some with titles such as Variations on 'Lament for the Death of Charlemagne', *The Maze of Longing*, and *Stone/like stillness*, this entirely, austerely tonal work requires deceptively subtle sensitivity. Meditational? Yes, but not background music: slow your breath and feel the voice of the organ as it 'breathes', living sound

Christmas selection

Like the fabled long-awaited bus, two albums book-ended by tremendous fanfares for brass and organ, launching choir and congregation into the Service and sending them out glowing, have appeared at once. Both establishments give generously for Advent and Christmas, but let's begin with the lesser-known, one that proudly presents four seasonal choral services annually, the Choir of Portsmouth Cathedral. **The First Nowell (Signum Records SIGCD943)** carries the listener from the Advent Prose to Rutter's *All bells in Paradise* with affectionate interpretations, immediacy, and, above all, an engaging, youthful sound. Lesser-known gems such as June Clark's *Let us light a candle* and *Nativitas: Reflection 8: O magnum mysterium* by Philip Moore for solo organ, impress among the 'usual suspects'.

More fanfares to finish, but first the 300th anniversary of Scarlatti's death is celebrated vigorously in an album from the brilliant Coro e Orchestra Ghislieri. **Christmas Night in the Bethlehem of the West – Music for Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome** [Arcana 587] features Scarlatti's *Messa per il Santissimo Natale*, discovered in the extensive church archives, and his glorious virtuoso solo *Cantata Pastorale*, vivaciously sung by soprano Carlotta Colombo. Scarlatti employs his emotional and dramatic talents, but also reveals a technical mastery of ecclesiastical traditions in works such as the stile antico processional, *Beata Mater*. Compelling contrasts, expertly painted chiaroscuro and impeccable style inform this intelligent programme. Style, subtlety, imagination and clarity also adorn in **Charpentier: Baroque Christmas** [SDG737] from the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists, directed by Christophe Rousset. The cantata *In Nativitatem Domini Canticum* is a substantial curtain-raiser for the celebrated *Messe de Minuit*, framed here by two groups of four Noëls, traditional French carols from which Charpentier drew his melodies. Playing and singing of the highest order makes this a Christmas must-have.

An anthology dedicated to a living composer should be a superb calling-card. Here are two contrasted examples: **A Christmas Offering** [Signum Records SIG953] from The Choir of King's College, London, showcases the work of PhD almuna, Kristina Arakelyan. Director Joseph Fort opines that she 'fuses elements of the English choral style with aspects of the Armenian Apostolic tradition', though the latter is almost undetectably subtle. The title work, a 10-movement tribute to Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* for harp with mixed voices, is both unashamedly derivative and fun. 'O Adonai' is the best of Arakelyan's soft-focused works with piano (played by the composer). More engaging still are her *a cappella* 'Sanctus', *Te lucis ante terminum*, and *Evening Prayer*. The singing throughout is committed and emotional. New music ought to feature in Christmas concerts and services and directors of accomplished choirs will find inspiration in Clive Osgood's works as showcased in a 25-minute anthology, **Christmas Collection** [Convivium CR106], performed by the stellar forces of Polyphony and the Britten Sinfonia. Such performers guarantee brilliance, but Osgood's stuff is genuine quality – a fresh and expert spin on standard seasonal texts, including some favourites from Piae Cantiones, mercifully free from superficial sweetness.

On Christmas Night – London Choral Sinfonia [Orchid Music Group ORC100402] is a lavish orchestral production. Christmas fine-dining with all the trimmings, garnished with tinselled excess and guilty pleasures, featuring treble-of-the-moment Malakai Bayoh who is surely walking in the air in more ways than one. Listener-friendliness also characterises **The Wise Men and the Star – The Sixteen** [CORO COR16215], an anthology largely of recent things plus a few traditional carols, offering fresh material with comforting familiarity and nothing to scare the donkey. Greater depth and challenge comes from fine works by Margaret Rizza, James McCarthy and Cecilia McDowall. Even more impressive is **A Babe is born** [Resonus RES10371] from St Martin's Voices, an excellent album of contemporary Advent/Christmas material with stand-out works by McDowall, Gabriel Jackson, David Bednall, plus some next generation composers all sung with crystalline clarity, a mature purity and expressive warmth.

No strangers to challenge, celebrated USA male-voice ensemble Chanticleer presents a masterclass in ensemble and blend in **Joy to the World** [Delos DE3623]. Super smooth, from falsettists to basso-profundo, stunning singing and thoughtful arrangements spring emotional ambushes as they explore renaissance motets by Palestrina and Morales, traditional tunes, and new commissions from Joanna Marsh – three magical movements from her *Winter's Garland*. An exceptional anthology recorded with tremendous bloom and burnished patina. Also standing out from the Christmas crowd is an atmospheric and inspired programme, co-curated by Rowan Williams. **Nowel – Advent and Beyond** [Delphian DCD3431] also includes a stunning partner-piece to Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, *Nowel el el* by Piers Connor Kennedy, commissioned by these performers, Ensemble Pro Victoria and harpist Cecily Beer, for six male voices. Lovelies from Howells, Stopford, Byrd and Praetorius complete a welcome and wondrous album.

The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, offers **O Holy Night** [Signum SIGCD913] which includes many fine 'standards', notably the *Three Carol Anthems* by Herbert Howells, Poulenc's *Quatre Motets pour le temps de Noël*, and items by Pearsall, Rutter et al, plus unexpected treasures such as a moving excerpt from Mendelssohn's *Christus* and recent works by Jonathan Dove, Errollyn Wallen and Becky McGlade. The unaccompanied singing has loads of atmosphere in invested interpretations. This may not be your average Oxbridge album, but what about the cliché that is The Choir of King's College, Cambridge? Like Portsmouth, they send you forth with fanfares, this time 'Hark, the Herald Angels Sing' and 'O Come all ye Faithful' get the treatment from Sir David Willcocks in **All the Stars Looked Down** [KGS0075] – a celebration of national treasure Sir John Rutter's 80th Birthday, with mostly his music but also tracks by his inspirations including Ralph Vaughan Williams and former directors at King's: Willcocks, Ledger, and Cleobury. The choir is joined by the Britten Sinfonia for those brassy bits and some accompanied carols. Is it akin to opening a box of crystallised fruits and polishing them off? You decide.

REBECCA TAVENER

in minute variations of air-pressure as the chords change. The composer's wish to evoke early instruments is met by Cooman's impeccable restraint on the Peter J Gomes and Charles B Fisk Memorial Organ, Harvard University, recorded with intimate yet expansive clarity. What's the very opposite of showboating? This.

REBECCA TAVENER

CHORAL CDS

Everlasting Light

The Choir of Bath Abbey, Dewi Rees (org) / Huw Williams (dir)

CRD 3556

★★★

Showcasing the boy choristers and lower voices of Bath Abbey in a varied selection of favourite anthems and liturgical works by composers including Stainer, Ireland, Britten, Lloyd, Mathias, James MacMillan and Matthew Martin, this celebratory programme marks the 150th anniversary of the rebirth of the choir in 1875 following a reordering of the building and the establishment for the first time of a trained, robed, paid choir of boys and men. Alumni and some members of the girls' choir founded in 1997 join the core group for performances of Parry's *Hear my words, ye people* and Stanford's B flat Te Deum. Bath Abbey has no choir school; the boys rehearse just three times a week, and many of them attend state schools. Director of Music Huw Williams makes the point in his notes that in an era where singing can be seen as counter-cultural for boys, preserving the musical heritage of choirs like this is vital. Evidence of his success is apparent here not only in the robust enthusiasm of the choristers' singing, but in the inclusion of *Spirit divine*, a thoughtful hymn setting by Gavin Phelps, a treble in the choir at the time of the recording and now the abbey's organ scholar, who also performs, *A Pale Blue Dot*, inspired by NASA's photo of earth from afar and by Luke Jerram's Gaia installation in the abbey.

CLARE STEVENS

Lucy Walker: Choral Works

St Martin's Voices, Stephen Farr (org) / Andrew Earis (dir)

Resonus RES10361

★★★★★

'Luminous' was the word I was going to use to characterise Lucy Walker's choral idiom, before noticing that she uses it herself early on in her notes to this debut recording, celebrating her time as composer-in-residence to St Martin's Voices, the fine young professional ensemble attached to St Martin-in-the-Fields church in Central London. Commissions from several other choirs are also included, such as *O Nata Lux* for Anna Lapwood and the Choir of Pembroke College, Cambridge; *Ave virgo sanctissima* for York Minster and *Love flows* for the installation of a new dean of Wells. *O Sing to the Lord,* written for the Choir of Holy Sepulchre, London, is a typical example of how Walker interweaves contrapuntal lines and harmonic progressions in quite an academic way to create works of great beauty, performed here with immense care and affection. The relationship with St Martin's has produced some of the most intriguing pieces, such as a gorgeous setting of Andy Raine's *Make me an island* written for a festival on Lindisfarne. Listening to a whole album of quite slow, transcendent radiance in one sitting I found myself longing for a different texture – though a setting of *Let all the world* does eventually give conductor Andrew Earis the chance to find an extra gear. There is no doubt Lucy Walker (born in 1998) deserves the reputation she has so speedily attained and this is a wonderful showcase for her work.

CLARE STEVENS

Michael Haydn: Requiem Pro defuncto Archiepiscopo Sigismundo; Missa Sancti Hieronymi

Julia Doyle (s), Kate Symonds-Joy (ms), James Robinson (t), Malachy Frame (b), The Choir of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, Academy of Ancient Music / Matthew Martin (dir)

Linn CKD771

★★★★

This recording reminded me that Michael Haydn's C minor Requiem is a truly wonderful and inventive work, a precursor of Mozart's by 20 years that deserves to be much better known than it is. Signed off in December 1771, it was written following the untimely death of the composer's employer, Prince-Archbishop Sigismund Graf von Schrattenbach, but must also have been an elegy for Haydn's baby daughter, who had died a few months previously without seeing her first birthday. There is a real emotional and spiritual journey in this piece, infused with deep sadness, especially in the *Offertorium* and the *Agnus Dei* – although the solo quartet creates a lovely sense of light emerging after darkness in the graceful Benedictus. All four vocal soloists are graduates of Gonville & Caius, with tenor James Robinson outstanding for his warmth of tone and ease of delivery. After one or two infelicities in the opening *Kyrie* – intrusive 'r's in the choir and slightly loose ensemble – Matthew Martin's forces settle down to give a heartfelt, expressive account of the work. They all have fun with the very different Mass in honour of St Jerome, with its unusual instrumental scoring for two soloistic oboes, two orchestral oboes, two bassoons, three trombones, and continuo – especially in the *Et resurrexit*, where echoing phrases blossom in turn from each voice part like bursting fireworks, although this is followed by a tender, reflective *Sanctus*.

CLARE STEVENS

Sublime Calculations

Fretwork and Sansara, Iestyn Davies (ct) / Tom Herring (dir)

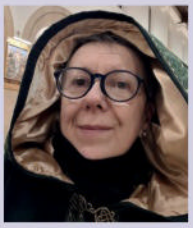
Platoon PLAT26767

★★★★★

Sansara describes itself as 'a collective of professional singers, composers, and creatives from across the UK, creating transformational choral experiences'. The transformational effect is probably felt as much by the performers as by their audiences; I can imagine a contemplative immersion like this in the music of Arvo Pärt will influence their approaches to any future encounters with his work. Nine pieces are chosen to illustrate Pärt's signature musical language, tintinnabuli, and his distillation and reduction of sounds and harmonic patterns to achieve intense concentration – the 'sublime calculations' referenced in the album's title. Director Tom Herring says that

▶

EARLY MUSIC



Rebecca Tavener rounds up the latest releases

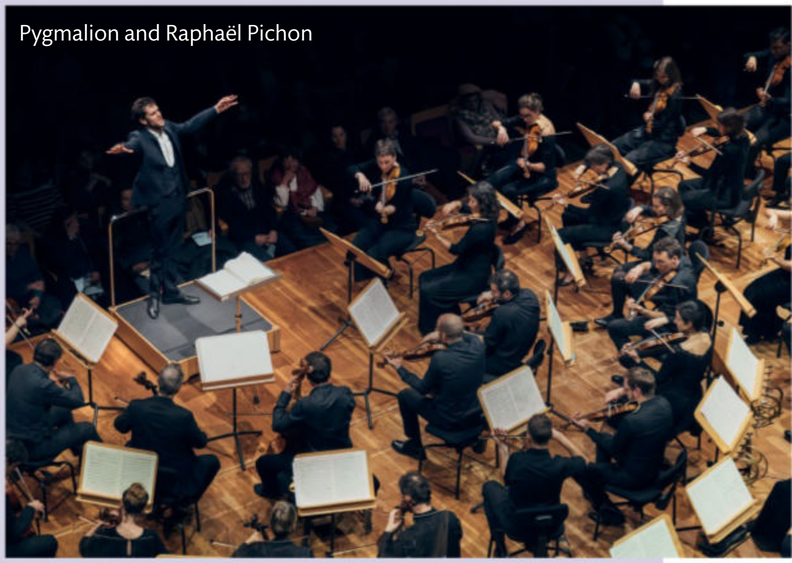
Here's a voyage through the baroque, from concertante to galante, setting sail with the adventurous Italian label Tactus and an intriguing discovery from Bologna in the early 1600s: **Girolamo Giaccobbe – L'Aurora ingannata** [TC560702]. Probably composed for an aristocratic wedding, *Aurora Deceived* is a classical love story featuring Venus, Adonis, Cupid, choruses of hunters and graces and, eventually, reconciled lovers. The singing actors of Dramatodía supply both characters and character, with richly expressive voices joined by lutes, harp, bowed strings, and director Alberto Allegrezza performing both as haute-contre and instrumentalist. The scenes are interspersed with elegant instrumental canzonas by Aurelio Bonelli, recorded in an indulgent acoustic. Progressive Italian composers for whom the concertante style was the new normal included **Tarquinio Merula – Concerti Spirituali** [Ricercar RIC474]. Merula enjoyed a distinguished career in Cremona, Warsaw and Bergamo, but the organ best suited to his virtuosic music is the celebrated Antegnati instrument in the Basilica di Santa Barbara, Mantua, here played with élan by Bernard Foccroulle. Merula calls for notes such as A flat, D sharp and A sharp and he wrote for an instrument that might have three split sharp keys per octave, creating temperaments that favour major thirds and allow modulations into uncommon keys. The Mantovan instrument is one of few such that have survived, nurtured with sensitive, historically informed restorations. Intricate organ works are interspersed by motets from InAlto (violin, cornett, trombones and theorbo) and the subtle singing of Alice Foccroulle.

'Raphaël Pichon unfailingly finds the dance and the drama'

From the dawn of the Baroque to its apogee in sacred music and the **J S Bach Mass in B minor** [Harmonia Mundi HMM902754.55]. The magnificent singers and players of Pygmalion are recorded in a large acoustic, yet nothing gets lost. The flexible 30-strong chorus responds to every nuance. Contrapuntal clarity and balance with a faith-filled transparency, like gazing into an intricate rock-crystal monstrance, compels as Raphaël Pichon unfailingly finds the dance and the drama. Sublime intensity and world-shaking climaxes, not aggressive but electrifying and exhilarating, contrast with tender, intimate chamber-music. Pichon's judgement is unerring as he and his outstanding soloists open a channel to the numinous. This is an essential interpretation.

Some similarly high-octane Handel follows, but first a delightful recording of his sacred almost-chamber music in **Handel – Chandos Anthems HWV 248, 249b, 251b, 256a** [Alpha 1153] from Arcangelo with just eight singers, capturing the lightness and delicacy of the nouveau riche Duke's original forces, the Cannons Concert, and a classy memorial to a man of refined taste whose Palladian mansion was a fitting setting for Handel's inventions. Nimble soloists and refined playing bring an engaging energy to this finely balanced recording, feeling as though it resounds in one's own baronial pile. At the other end of the scale, the reissue of a 2013 recording of sombre, moralistic work that tells of the futility and ultimate downfall of empire might unintentionally chime with the current zeitgeist. **Handel – Belshazzar** [Harmonia Mundi HAX89412729] from William Christie and Les Arts Florissants boasts a stellar cast of soloists and, while academics may cavil at the quirks in Christie's version, this is a vivid, masterful and impeccable performance from soloists, chorus and orchestra. Once Handel saw the 'writing on the wall' for Italian opera in London, this oratorio of 1745 was one of several designed to find commercial success. Handel and his librettist Jennens were a dream-team, but what about Graun and Metastasio? Handel's German contemporary Carl Heinrich Graun had aristocratic and regal patrons who gave him no incentive to diverge from Italian opera to turn a shekel. Ironically, however, it is his sacred music that remained popular after his death. His opera **Adriano in Siria** [Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 19658812322] is three acts of improbable classical drama setting a very popular libretto by Metastasio featuring fanciful Roman shenanigans. Ensemble 1700 yomp with deceptive and debonair ease through this galante material, more akin to Telemann than Handel, with a momentum that holds the ear. The castrato roles are taken by falsettists and, if to modern ears the balance among the soloists towards high voices seems awkward, their technical expertise and emotional commitment will surely win over many, as the enthusiastic applause for this live performance demonstrates.

Rebecca Tavener is a singer and director specialising in early and contemporary music. She is founder-director of Canty, Scotland's only professional medieval music group



Pygmalion and Raphaël Pichon

FRED_MORTAGNE

arrangements of some of the pieces for voices and viols or for viols alone, made with the composer's permission (very effective, especially the *Stabat mater)*, are the USP that justifies yet another addition in his 90th birthday year to the existing library of Pärt recordings – but in truth there is no need to apologise for a sequence of performances as fine as this. Perfection.

CLARE STEVENS

The Voice of the Beloved

Netherlands Radio Choir / Benjamin Goodson (dir)
Pentatone 5187402
★★★★★

Frank Martin's Mass for Double Choir *a cappella*, Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur's seven-movement *Le Cantique des Cantiques* and Messiaen's exquisite motet *O sacrum convivium* are the three works chosen by Benjamin Goodson for his second recording as chief conductor of the 56 professional voices of the Netherlands Radio Choir. Their flexibility and control in phrasing, range of tone and dynamic, tuning, blend, commitment and sheer gutsiness, especially in the Martin, were exactly what I needed to hear as my final disc on this issue's reviewing pile. It was like plunging from a sauna into a cold bath – in a good way – so refreshing and invigorating. The drama and sensual, colourful imagery in the Daniel-Lesur are brilliantly expressed and the plangent intensity of the slow-moving Messiaen makes a perfect conclusion to the programme. This is professional singing of wonderful, serious choral repertoire at its very best – a superb disc. CLARE STEVENS

Sky of my Heart

New York Polyphony
BIS 2719
★★★★★

Sky of my Heart
New York Polyphony

If you loved the Hilliard Ensemble, make room in your heart for this American male voice quartet. Their expressive radiance and rich, focused blend, gilds a programme, both clever and compelling, of old and (largely) new works, many touching on the themes of troubled times, endings, interior life, love, mysticism and spiritual hope. Bookended by Byrd and Gibbons, fine works by Ivan Moody, Becky McGlade, two Whitman settings by Paul Moravec, and Japanese poems to the moon set by Akemi Naito impress. Outstanding are Andrew Smith's very personal *Katarsis* and Nico Muhly's *My Days*, where the voices interact with the plangently human tones of LeStrange Viols. A dramatic 16- minute 'ritualised memory piece', it stitches Psalm 39 to fragments of Gibbons's autopsy notes – a strange but telling tribute.

REBECCA TAVENER

Ricordanze – a record of love

Music Secreta / Laurie Stras
Lucky Music LCKY005
★★★★

RICORDANZE
a record of love

This lavish double album features the premiere recordings of works from the Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript of the convent of San Matteo in Arceti, a fragile treasure of 78 varied works, from Masses to sacred songs in the Italian vernacular. Two elegant Mass settings from 1520 are framed by Vespers Psalms, motets and songs, revealing the rich musical life of the sisters and their technical prowess. There is virtue in the honest variety, from girlish to mature, of vocal timbre, whether in consort, choir or as soloists, entirely appropriate for the evocation of a nunnery. Lute, organ, and bass viol provide extra colours and lower sonorities in lively, believable and engaging performances guided by impeccable research: another illuminated window on the enclosed world of religious women.

REBECCA TAVENER

Chromatic Renaissance

EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble / James Weeks (dir)
Winter & Winter 910 293-2
★★★★★

Albums of chromatic curiosities from the late renaissance pop up from time to time and it seems fitting that these contemporary music specialists should have a go. From the moment they launch full-throatedly into Lasso's *Timor et tremor*, Exaudi's ease with surprising harmonies and temperaments pays dividends. Having intelligently interrogated the scores to reveal their harmonic secrets in relation to the texts, they own this repertoire. Works by Vincentino, Rore, Lusitano (his extraordinary motet *Heu me Domine*), Marenzio, Luzzaschi, both sacred and secular, astound with daring invention and, while one might experience moments of queasiness on the voyage, Exaudi navigates listeners to safe havens. The recording quality captures every nuance of their finely balanced blend, highlighting the ensemble's clarity and precision.

REBECCA TAVENER

Alexander Knaifel: Chapter Eight

State Choir Latvija, Youth Choir Kamēr, Riga Cathedral Boys Choir, Patrick Demenga (vc) / Andres Mustonen (dir)
ECM 2637
★★★★

Knaifel's 'community prayer', based on the *Song of Songs* is a concerto that is not a concerto. Instead, the cellist plays at the centre of a cruciform arrangement of choirs, arrayed in a highly resonant church acoustic, subject to the singing rather than the focus of the piece. Though it has a secular reputation as an erotic poem, the so-called 'Song of Solomon' is also the great prefiguring of the mystical union of Christ and his church and Knaifel's rapt piece, exquisitely sung and recorded here, restores that prophetic element.

BRIAN MORTON

Veni Creator Spiritus: Second Vespers of the Solemnity of Pentecost

Choir of Westminster Cathedral / Simon Johnson (dir)
Ad Fontes AF015
★★★★

Pentecost calls for a big sound and a few flames. The very moment of the church's creation, Pentecost is all about voices, and how these voices soar in Westminster Cathedral, as the choir processes through the chants and psalms proper to this great solemnity, which is compounded of joy and awe in equal measure. The inclusion of later themes, by Tallis and Victoria, Gabriel Jackson and, right at the end, Howells and Duruflé, doesn't dilute the occasion with anachronism. On the contrary, it reinforces the importance of Pentecost as a foundational event in the life of faith.

BRIAN MORTON

Gabriel Jackson: Choral Works

Choir of Canterbury Cathedral, Jamie Rogers (org), Sam Corkin (sax) / David Newsholme (dir/org)
Resonus RES 10360
★★★★

Jackson insists that his music is all 'about' Canterbury Cathedral and its tradition of great music, which goes back to when Thomas Tallis was a chorister and comes forward to Stravinsky. Jackson's summation of his own music as 'Tallis meets Stravinsky', cited in the liner booklet, is neat enough but too glib to convey his genuine originality and the unmistakable personality of these glorious pieces. If he addresses Canterbury Cathedral in his work, then the cathedral, as represented by its great choir, responds with generosity. A single word stands out in the whole programme, from Psalm 147, and it is 'sing'. That's all this music is about, the joy of singing and the human and celestial joy that singing conveys.

BRIAN MORTON

Divine Light: The Living Indian Choral Tradition

Somerville College Choir, Oxford / Will Dawes (dir)
Resonus RES10365
★★★★

This album's purview is broad, defining the 'living Indian choral tradition' beyond composers from India and the Indian diaspora, and beyond music that is stylistically influenced by Indian genres. Nor is this a contemporary music release, per se. Here, 'tradition' is as much an operative word as 'living'. Victor Paranjoti, a godfather of Indian choral music who died in 1967, is represented with two selections, and Vanraj Bhatia, the late concert and film composer (1927-2021), rightly gets the last word with his cycle *Six Seasons*, a seamless blend of Hindustani raga and Western SATB harmony. Representing a younger guard, Shruthi Rajasekar's *Light Eternal* plumbs her own dual identity as a Carnatic and western classical performer. Meditative, lush choral writing is interspersed by improvisations from her mother, the acclaimed Saraswati veena player Nirmala Rajasekar, and mridangam player V Srinivasan. (The elder Rajasekar also has a work on the album, the instrumental-only *Coffee Kapi*.) American composer Reena Esmail's brassy, bubbly *Tuttarana* (2014) – a portmanteau of 'tutti' and 'tarana,' Hindustani vocal improvisations – delights in similar cultural collisions, though her and Rajasekar's styles couldn't be further apart. Non-Indian composers writing in solidly western idioms also chime in with works inspired by the oeuvre of Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore. Strong statements by Craig Hella Johnson and Vytautas Miškinis aside, these selections tend to be the album's most under-whelming. That's never a slight on the Somerville choristers, whose luminous palette bring these works to life in Technicolor.

HANNAH EDGAR

Songs of Ourselves

The Fourth Choir / Jamie Powe
Orchid
ORC100389
★★★★

Long before St. Thomas Aquinas described nine groups of heavenly angels, divided into three 'choirs', the polymath and mystic Hildegard von Bingen observed the same ordering in a divine vision. Though this riveting debut album is Hildegard-less, the name of the very much earth-based (London, to be exact) Fourth Choir playfully references her schematic. The ensemble's focus on LGBTQ composers, or artists otherwise on the margins, informs this collection of mostly contemporary music, though the three Baroque-and-before selections sprinkled throughout evince the same blend and tonal warmth. The record opens with *Wild Nights – Wild Nights!*, on Emily Dickinson's poem of the same name; Kerry Andrew's account is dizzy and breathless, amusingly invoking everything from low-voice sea shanties to horse whinnies. Canadian composer Stuart Beatch's powerful and incantatory setting of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* not only provides one of the album's more epic statements but also its namesake. The quality of compositions on the record is generally high, and their styles genuinely varied. But American composer Cooper Baldwin perhaps utters the most lasting word with *Libera Me (as embers singe the tide)*. He sets an amalgam of original text, the Latin Requiem Mass, and excerpts from a 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. Stomps give way to a Dies Irae of primal fury.

HANNAH EDGAR

And the Blackbird Sang

Excalibur Voices, Anna Markland (pf) / Duncan Aspen (dir)
EM Records EMR CD094
★★★

This enterprising programme of British ensemble vocal music includes several first recordings across a range of works encompassing composers such as Coleridge-Taylor, Howells and Ireland. This is Excalibur Voices' first commercial release under its founder-director the widely experienced Duncan Aspden, and it is heartening to find an outfit prepared to take a largely untrodden path by also including music by figures such as Edgar Bainton and Robin Milford. While the generously resonant acoustic of Oxford's Church of St John the Evangelist certainly enhances the choir's sound, it unfortunately works against the clarity of its diction. Without recourse to the excellent liner booklet, it was often difficult to comprehend the sung texts. From time to time, the choir's blend proved to be a little too raw and its intonation wayward (eg at the very start of Milford's *Songs of Escape*), which is disappointing in a CD that promises so much in terms of repertory.

PHILIP REED

Reena Esmail: Exaltations

Cathedral Choral Society / Steven Fox (dir)
Acis APL78314
★★★★

This CD presents the premiere recording of Indian-American composer's Reena Esmail's *Exaltations*, made shortly after the work's first performance in 2024.

Commissioned by the Cathedral Choral Society, *Exaltations* combines Christian traditions with Indian classical music in a three-movement work for double choir and brass quintet. While the works of Giovanni Gabrieli and Anton Bruckner provide inspiration, each of its three movements – 'Hosanna', 'Alleluia' and 'Gloria' – explores a different Hindustani raga reflecting Esmail's ongoing engagement with her bicultural heritage. Fox directs an uplifting account of this immediately attractive and highly accessible music. His substantial vocal forces produce a clean, bright sound throughout, well drilled in rhythmic energy and ever attentive to the text.

PHILIP REED

ORGAN MUSIC

Rachel Laurin: Cantabile à deux

(Morning Star, $22.25)

Gerald Hendrie: Six concert studies for organ

(Banks Music Publications, £15.00)

Tim Ravalde: Te Deum

(Goodmusic Publishing, £4.50; available as download)

African-American Organ Music Anthology Vol 2. Ed, Mickey Thomas Terry

(Morning Star, $21.50)

The Chenault Organ Duo commissioned the Cantabile in early 2020. It is, as one would expect from Rachel Laurin, a precisely judged and expertly paced work of (at an estimate) about six minutes' duration, clearly displaying in its course the 'contrasting characters' of the composer's note; the piece flows with a real sense of unfolding argument and transitions are deftly done. The main challenges in performance are arguably interpretative, not technical. There are quite a few moments where tempo modifications will require precise alignment and careful listening on the part of both partners, who will need similar instincts for rubato and pulse. Musical interest is evenly shared between the duettists (both of whom play pedals); the registration scheme suggests that three manuals are necessary, as is a top F sharp pedalboard.

Gerald Hendrie's set of six études was composed (also in 2020) with two players in mind; Andrea Albertin (1-3) and Tom Winpenny (4-6). As the title suggests, they are demanding works, focusing variously on questions of precise rhythmic detail and articulation, ostinato, pedal technique (double-pedalling, fast repeated notes), textural clarity and so on; they often test the instrument as much as the performer. The shades of Demessieux and Dupré occasionally emerge, while BWV 769 is explicitly honoured in the fifth piece of the set, with its ingenious combination of chorale phrases. The group would certainly work as a whole in recital, but there's no reason why selections could not be made. The idiom is approachable, although not ingratiating, and there's a clear sense of logic behind every note. Tim Ravalde wrote his *Te Deum* for the 950th anniversary of Chichester Cathedral, where he is the assistant organist. It's a cleverly-managed fantasia and fugue based on the well-known plainsong tone, and displays both a sure sense of texture and a completely convincing sense of progression to an exciting conclusion. It is particularly noteworthy for its rather impressive contrapuntal writing – the fugue is as rigorous as you could wish, while still maintaining a clear sense of musical personality (Distler and Hindemith, perhaps).

The second volume of Morning Star's anthology of African-American organ music again offers a valuable introduction to repertoire unlikely to be familiar on this side of the Atlantic. Four composers are represented – Noel da Costa, Charles D Coleman, Evelyn Simpson Curenton and Marvin Mills – all of notable professional distinction and representatives of a 'sorely-neglected but substantive school', as the introduction aptly puts it. The works anthologised draw on hymnody and East African traditional music, as well as 'composer-generated' themes; there are two Toccatas (one on 'Joy to the world', the other free-composed), an Impromptu for pedal solo, a prelude on *Lauda Anima* and a rhythmically complex meditation on a traditional East African lament. Technical demands are often quite notable, and top C and G compasses seem to be obligatory in places. There's an intriguing range of idioms and approaches throughout the volume, and it's possible to imagine most of the works here finding a home in either concert or liturgy.

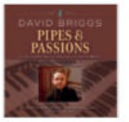
STEPHEN FARR

BOOKS

PIPES & PASSIONS: A Life Committed to the King of Instruments

David Briggs

Chestnut Music DB001



David Briggs's new memoir might be forgiven for hewing to a trope, because in one sense we've read this type of book before. A prodigy is recognised early and supported solidly, whereupon, applying diligence to match his gifts, he rises steadily through ever loftier circumstance. Briggs has fun giving us his version of the genre, and, at 30,000 words, has chosen a breezy approach over anything tome-like or over-serious. The volume reads all the more speedily for being carved into 38 chapters, many but two pages long – a charcuterie approach that seems an extension of the author's bright-eyed manner.

While not all such chronicles involve those incubated in music, Briggs enjoyed a childhood flush with it. Being the son of a cellist and nephew of a lay clerk at Coventry gave early introductions, with the occasional home musicale and early singing and playing opportunities. In a wider sense, Briggs' fortune testifies to the mere fact of growing up in the late 1950s and early '60s, when music's centrality to English church and civic life still felt unquestioned, and opportunities abounded. Briggs offers fond and fun memories of early years: singing treble at Birmingham Cathedral under Roy Massey, and later being Massey's assistant at Hereford Cathedral; organist of Truro Cathedral at a mere 26 (getting close to, if not besting Barry Rose in that statistic), the move to Gloucester Cathedral, with its organ rebuild, involvement in Three Choirs, and other choral and orchestral high points.

An inclination to improvise came early, as did an enthralment with the milieu of Pierre Cochereau, whose dazzling creations Briggs would go on to transcribe and publish. Eventually Briggs joined that

▸

great westward emigration of UK organ-based musicians to the United States. In clear detail, Briggs recalls how he rebalanced his career with a lighter involvement in church work, the more to concentrate on concertising, composition and relationships.

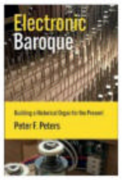
The book's 10"x10" format gives something of a guidebook feel. Photographs are plentiful, and several quite wonderful, but sub-par reproduction leaves most of the black-and-white imagery washed out. Briggs writes as he plays: genial, positive, with ambassadorial energy. The language is one of ready superlative; one senses that few, if any, adjectives were deleted in the editing. An earnestness about life's blessings, however, prevents the frankness from coming off as glib. I was reminded of our first meeting: in 1992 at Truro Cathedral, a group of US builders and players on a UK research tour. On that bright May day, Briggs was hospitality itself. He had recently had a new console from Mander, including one of the earliest pedal divide functions whose split point could be adjusted. Briggs was joined on the bench by Thomas Murray, to site-read four-hands a Mahler symphony from a pocket Novello score. That up-for-anything element has never left Briggs; even this publication has the air of another lark-project tackled. In an age when classical music – indeed much traditional art – seems under threat from apathy or lack of funding, it's encouraging to confront Briggs' unabashed passion and positivity, that the right attitude and old-fashioned hard work can still make great things happen. The reading highlights something bittersweet as well, in that the kind of childhood Briggs enjoyed seems increasingly less available to those not raised in elevated circumstance. But maybe not? Briggs could have been raised by Goldilocks and the Three Bears and still have turned out being David Briggs.

JONATHAN AMBROSINO

Electronic Baroque: Building a Historical Organ for the Present

Peter F Peters

The MIT Press ISBN: 9780262553636



Electronic Baroque tells the story of the Utopa Baroque Organ, built for the OrgelPark in Amsterdam and inaugurated in 2018. A collaboration between four builders (Elbertse, Eule, Sinua and Yokota), this is a unique, truly 21st-century organ, combining a baroque instrument modelled after Zacharias Hildebrandt with hyperorgan technology: the organ played as electro-acoustic instrument by a live musician or MIDI input device, with options for live sampling, wind manipulation, and control of each individual pipe. Tracing the project from its earliest stages to the triumphant inaugural concerts, *Electronic Baroque* provides a unique glimpse into the trials and tribulations of such an ambitious build, chronicling the many problems solved and contrasting views reconciled over the course of five years.

Author Peter F Peters was attached to the project from its start as a researcher and observer, and much of *Electronic Baroque* has a charming, fly-on-the-wall quality: issues with combining a 21st-century desire for IPC (individual pipe control) with an historic spring chest design are solved by drawing diagrams on napkins over dinner, debates over case design are hashed out over coffee, our author finds himself at the console playing the first ranks of pipes to be voiced in situ.

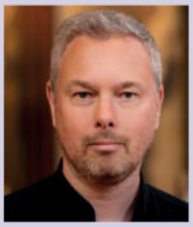
To see the minds of organ builders and experts at work in such close quarters is an undoubted privilege, granting insight into the problem-solving and innovation that might go unnoticed when one sits at a completed console.

The intimate discussion of voicing with Yokota is one such stand-out example. Peters presents a unique and thought-provoking world where early modern wind channels might be subjected to such force (via computer input) that they might be irrevocably damaged. With as much detail about the casting of historic pipe metal as about miniature computer circuits, Peters encourages a holistic view of the numerous components – obvious and not so – that contribute to a successful instrument. As a narrator, Peters brings his personal enthusiasm for the organ, but his primary focus is as a scholar of Science and Technology Studies. A crucial part of his project is to place the organ in dialogue with the work of various theorists, discussing aspects of the project through lenses of anthropology, sociology and philosophy. In so doing, Peters aims to emphasise the relevance of the project in broader academic contexts, approaching his task as an ethnographer: the organ builder is reconsidered as a craftsman through the work of sociologist Richard Sennett, tasks in the workshop re-examined via anthropologist Tim Ingold; Bruno Latour and Hans-Georg Gadamer confront the organ and its music as (a)historical objects existing in and out of time. Peters describes himself as 'an organ anthropologist and empirical philosopher in the domain of music,' considering in the abstract notions of confronting history and meaning through 'art things' such as the Utopa organ. Such discussions will appeal to some readers more than others, and aim, above all else, to engage an academic audience within STS, for whom the organ itself is not the point of primary interest, but rather the provocative collision of musical technologies it represents. Having this outsider perspective undoubtedly results in unique observations. Reading as a historical musicologist, I did find instances where Peters abandoned potentially fascinating debates too soon: certainly, because of the differences between academic fields and their priorities.

Philosophically, for example, the question of why a baroque organ need be a Bach organ is never addressed. The presumed universality of Bach as Baroque, and the implications of this for an experiment positioned as transhistorical, would surely be a productive line of thought. Most provocatively, Peters fleetingly raises the question of whether in its electronic form the organ remains *an organ*, creating a striking binary between the organ as instrument and/or machine. Nevertheless, that this text can provoke further thought is symptomatic of the richness of Peters's material. Published by MIT Press as Open Access, *Electronic Baroque* joins a host of freely available Research Reports at the OrgelPark website: together presenting a wealth of fascinating ideas ripe for discussion.

ANNA STEPPLER

CHORAL SELECTION



Rupert Gough explores new Christmas sheet music releases and carol compilations

If ever there is a time for new music, it is surely Christmas where, every year, there are so many exciting new carol arrangements and original pieces to consider. For me, carol services should always be about discovering something new rather than regurgitating the old – like the search for inventive and entertaining Christmas presents for friends. The modern commercial world would have us forget the Advent season of anticipation altogether but at least we can enjoy this in music.

When looking for straightforward arrangements of traditional carols over the last few years, I have found the volume of music by Louis Halsey titled *Nova! Nova!* very valuable. I am pleased then to see a follow-up volume featuring a further 60 Christmas carols, hymns, descants and anthems. **Nova! Nova! 2** (SATB; Shorter House; ISMN 9790708131540) contains a wealth of practical arrangements covering Advent to Epiphany and carols from all over Europe, including several in the original language with English alternatives. Equally practical are three rather charming arrangements by the British organist and choir director Martindale Sidwell. **Three Carol Arrangements** (Church Music Society; ISBN 9780193708099) have been compiled and edited by Geoffrey Webber and include *I Saw Three Ships* with optional organ interludes, and unaccompanied arrangements of *Silent Night* in German and English and *The Holly and the Ivy*. All provide nice simple alternatives to more familiar versions of these popular melodies with minimal divisi.

If you are looking for something a bit different but still with plenty of audience appeal for concerts, then perhaps turn to the frozen north and **Nordic Christmas** (SATB with div & pno; Boosey & Hawkes; ISMN 9790060151484). This compilation features seven well-crafted arrangements of carols from Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Kim André Arnesen delivers a variety of emotions from the boisterous *O Yule, full of gladness* to the rich and dreamy *Lovely is the dark blue sky*. Good quality English lyrics are available as an alternative to the original language. All the pieces work well with piano accompaniment or can be performed with strings, percussion, piano and trumpet. There is much divisi but nothing too complex and always with good voice leading. An SSAA alternative is available too.

In a similar vein, Karen Marrolli has produced **Light of Piece: Celtic Carols for Christmas** (Morning Star MSM-70-500). Marrolli's own texts encourage us to use the story of the Nativity to inspire social justice and a sense of service. The choral parts are simple settings of folk melodies like *Salley Gardens* and *Kingsfold* often in unison. Alongside the piano accompaniment is the addition of flute, violin and traditional hand drum which introduce Celtic reels and jigs into the mix, transforming these carols into moving and entertaining pieces particularly suited to a concert setting. Each piece is also available separately.

Other single Christmas offerings worth mention include **Bethlehem whispers** (SATB with div. & org; Stainer & Bell ISM 9790220230165). Canon Gordon Giles's touching poem of a sky of glimmering gold is sensitively set by Tomas Hewitt Jones who never disappoints in writing a good tune and setting it with luxuriant yet tasteful harmony. Also full of lavish harmony is Lucy Walker's **Ave virgo sanctissima** (SATB div.; Boosey & Hawkes ISMN 9790060151811). Although commissioned for a carol service, this unaccompanied motet would suit any Marian occasion. As ever with Walker's writing, the rich textures are resonant and finely crafted with an uninterrupted flow through the text.

Displaying a refreshingly original voice is Ellen Gilson Voth's **Peace, my soul** (SATB with horn & pno; Galaxy Music Corp.). Voth adapts Maya Angelou's *Amazing peace: A Christmas Poem* – an emotive text of hope in troubled times. Taking inspiration from the opening line 'Snow upon snow' Voth weaves in fragments of *In the bleak midwinter*. The writing is tonally and rhythmically quirky and engaging and the obligato instrumental line can be substituted for another instrument. Finally, for a jazzy encore, look no further than **The winter's brightening** (SATB; piano; Banks Music Publications). Hilary Ashworth was a finalist in the BBC Radio 3 Carol Competition in 2022, and her original melody has been arranged for choir and piano by Alexander L'Estrange and Joanna Forbes L'Estrange. Simple, fun and bound to raise a smile from your audience.

Rupert Gough is director of choral music and college organist at Royal Holloway, University of London as well as organist and director of music at London's oldest surviving church, Saint Bartholomew the Great. He is also a published composer, arranger and editor

ADOBESTOCK

PACO ULMAN

Divine river

As celebrations continue for the 90th birthday of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, **Hattie Butterworth** explores the impact of this composer on collaborators closest to him

After 40 minutes on a coach from Estonia's capital, Tallinn, the bus pulls up at a wooded car park. We walk for 10 minutes along a forest path, surrounded by tall pine trees until the first sight of the centre is seen. It blends almost seamlessly with the landscape and flows.

The Arvo Pärt Centre was established in 2010 when the composer returned to Estonia from where he had lived in Germany since 1981. Pärt chose this village of Laulasmaa, on a peninsula surrounded by sea, as his residence.

It is a place of exceptional serenity, which is perhaps not surprising to those who know of Pärt's spirituality and reverence of slowness. Pärt was born in the Baltic republic of Estonia in 1935. In 1972 he was received into the Russian Orthodox Church and soon after developed his tintinnabuli composition style – inspired by the overtone series created when a bell is struck – writing the first work in this style *Für Alina* in 1976.

In 2025 Pärt turned 90 and it was this milestone that anchored the trip to Tallinn for the Arvo Pärt Days Festival, which lead up to the composer's birthday on 11 September. His legacy and its celebration is wide but all occurring with an apt quietness and humility. There is no pomp and circumstance – Pärt concerts don't usually go out with a bang, but linger with profound effect.

Following the opening concert, which saw the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir with its conductor Tõnu Kaljuste perform *Adam's Lament*, *Littlemore Tractus* and *In principio* at the Estonian Concert Hall, I met Kaljuste and his assistant for lunch. 'We started to collaborate at the end of the Eighties.' Kaljuste is frank, funny and charismatic. Off the podium, the 72-year-old drives a truck and lives on a remote island. 'Pärt was the pianist at the same house where my father conducted children's choir,' Kaljuste tells me. His father was also a conductor, Heino Kaljuste, who founded the Tallinn City Children's Choir, which later grew into the Ellerhein Children's Choir. He was also a renowned pedagogue and developed singing textbooks and children's choir song collections.

'I was 100 per cent inside Veljo Tormis's music at the time,' Kaljuste says of encountering Pärt in the late Eighties. 'But already it was too much for me. It was too expressive. I needed some other music to communicate: Then along comes Pärt.'

Along comes Pärt. It does feel as if he has occupied an area of choral music that is totally unique. He has, of course, been put into a box alongside John Tavener and Henryk Górecki, but there is something inexplicable about the paradoxical rawness and serenity of tintinnabuli. This identity of Pärt's has led to a worldwide marking of the 90th year with concerts in every corner of the world. In the UK, choirs such as Sansara, The Carice Singers and The Purcell Singers gave concerts around the September birthday. The Proms, too, saw a sold-out late-

SIIM VAHUR

▲ Estonian choir Vox Clamantis will perform at Music at Oxford on 15 October

night concert from the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir and Kaljuste.

As the year begins to close, Huddersfield and Oxford become the UK's Pärt centres. The Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival sees Estonia as a focus country with multiple concerts featuring Pärt's music. In November, Oxford's international concert series Music at Oxford presents a programme entirely focused on Pärt. 'Ninety Years of Arvo Pärt' sees performances from Merton College Choir, as well as screenings of the 2002 Arvo Pärt documentary and romantic comedy film *About Time*, which has gone some way in popularising Pärt's work for violin and piano, *Spiegel im Spiegel*. A talk from Pärt's son Michael Pärt will also offer a unique dimension to the man and his work, and academic musicians from the Pärt Centre will lead a day looking into the tinntinabuli technique on 13 November.

An Estonian representation is present in the series, with frequent Pärt collaborators Vox Clamantis presenting a concert on 15 November at Christ Church Cathedral. 'I met Pärt for the first time when I started Vox Clamantis in the Nineties.' I meet Vox Clamantis's founder and conductor Jaan-Eik Tulve in the lobby of the Estonian Concert Hall just before the opening concert of the Day's Festival. 'In the beginning we sang a lot of Gregorian chant. Pärt also liked Gregorian chant a lot so he very often came to our concerts and we became quite close.'

In the Oxford programme, the choir will sing one of Pärts latest works, *And I heard a voice*, which Tulve suggests holds particular significance. 'It's a unique piece because it is in Estonian. Pärt found an Estonian Bible and in the Book of Revelation, instead of the translation saying that "the dead people will rest" it says "the dead people will breathe". For me, it gives us an example of eternal life.' There's also a work by Tulve's wife, Helena Tulve, who is one of the most significant contemporary composers in Estonia. 'Helena has been close to Pärt for a very long time. "Gloria" was written in Laulasma near Arvo's house, using Arvo's piano. And so the atmosphere of Arvo is very strongly inside this piece.'

I'm interested to learn about what the difficulties are of getting inside Pärt's music and what the learning process is like. Tulve suggests it's more a sense of being open to letting it change and develop: 'It is always completely different when we start to the final concert version … it takes time to discover his music because it is full of very small, specific details and some jokes also, because he's a great person for jokes!'

'I don't like this question because it depends on the piece,' suggests Kaljuste. 'Sometimes when you come from other styles to singing Pärt, then you need time. It's not as if you can put the channel to Pärt line! Some people say the music is so difficult but if you have the basic intonation and peace in your voice, then it is easy to make.'

As you exit the atrium into the library of the Pärt Centre, you see a building consuming a small, enclosed courtyard area. An outside path leads to the building, which is the St Sophrony Chapel. A small space with whitewashed walls and a large icon on the main chapel wall of St Sophrony and his spiritual teacher, St Silouan of Mt Athos. The texts of both saints have an important place in the works of Arvo Pärt.

Having converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in 1972, Pärt has frequently said that his faith is the source of his art. Although Estonia is known to be one of the least religious countries in the world in terms of declared attitudes, I get a sense from those who work at the centre of the respect and open-mindedness to its importance for Pärt.

Kaljuste says that this freedom in faith is paramount in culture: 'What I feel most important is that people are free to believe what they want so there isn't pressure. Art brings together this concept of people sitting, listening and reading this text. They are present.They might be atheist, but they come to music. Afterall, life is river, it's not a lake that is fixed in one place. It's moving all the time with opinions moving.' ■

Ninety Years of Arvo Pärt is at Music at Oxford 11-16 November. musicatoxford.com

▼ Tonu Kaljuste, chief conductor of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir

KROOT TARKMEEL

CHORISTERS REVISITED

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Holly Baker meets previous choristers to learn about the subsequent direction of their lives and the impact of chorister education

ETHAN GRIFFIN-MCCLEARY

Where did your choral journey begin?

The church choir, in Askham, Cumbria, aged seven. My parents had heard me singing in the bath, realised I had a nice voice, and within months I was singing *See Amid the Winter's Snow* and making people cry. A few months after that I found myself at a voice trial in the Master of the Chorister's house in Durham, and my Cathedral Chorister journey began.

What were the highlights and lowlights of your experience?

Two low moments stand out, for different reasons. One involved my first concert in which I ended up in the concert with no music folder and no clue what to do. (It had an unexpected consequence which you can read about in my book.) The other was a few years later when a particularly vicious splinter made me miss my first ever Evensong, destroying a perfect attendance record.

Highlights were always the Advent Processions at Durham Cathedral – two services with a cathedral packed to the gills, so busy that the congregation stood like sardines in the west end, shepherded by stewards so the choir could process through them, in complete darkness, with candles clipped to folders dripping hot wax on the music.

But overall, not to sound twee about it, but towards the end of my time as a chorister at Durham Cathedral, I recall looking out on several evenings from the school window, seeing the Cathedral, lit, rising from the dark, ever present, and thinking how privileged I was to be there. Even at the age of 12, I was awed by the place. I still am.

Is there one piece that if you heard it again would transport you back to your choir days?

This is tricky because I still sing in a Cathedral Choir, so much of the music continues to be familiar. However a few pieces instantly send me back to my time as a chorister. The first ever service I sang, Matins on the first Sunday of term, we sang Britten's Te Deum in C. I've not sung it since, as we rarely sing Matins, so it retains its associative power.

What is your all-time favourite piece of choral music?

This is unfair. It's like asking which your favourite child is. Parry's *Blest pair of sirens* speaks to the musician in all of us. The Agnus Dei in Fauré's *Requiem* has, in its opening, the finest melody ever written. There is a simple beauty to the comforting familiarity of something like Stanford in C. But, honestly, it's an impossible question.

How has your exposure to choral music shaped your career?

I work as music & liturgy officer in Bristol Cathedral, as an Alto Lay Clerk in the cathedral choir, as head of website and social media for the Choral Evensong Trust, run a niche choral merchandise website, quiresandplaces.com, and wrote and published a book called *Evensong – Notes from the Choir.* I think it's safe to say that choral music is utterly essential to my life.

What is the biggest lesson you took away from this time of your life?

How to sign the alphabet so I could communicate without talking in services. Also that being part of a choir, adding your voice to those of your friends, and making something beautiful from nothing, is one of the most exquisitely precious things in life. It constantly reminds me that not only is there beauty in the world, but we can create it ourselves. (But mainly the sign language thing.)

Evensong – Notes from the Choir by Tim Popple is out now on Quires and Places. Quiresandplaces.com

Durham Cathedral where Popple was a chorister

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